the Most Important Point

Zen Teachings of Edward Espe Brown

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sounds true
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You Can't Always Get What You Want

Wild West Tassajara

I first came to Tassajara the summer of 1966. My friend Alan Winter had gone on a Zen Center ski trip—I think it was the last Zen Center ski trip—in the spring of 1966 and met someone named Richard Baker. Richard told Alan that Zen Center was thinking about buying some land down here at Tassajara. Zen Center had about $1000 in the bank. He told my friend there was this place called Tassajara and "Why don't you get a job there?" So Alan got a job at Tassajara as a handyman. He told me I could probably get a job in the kitchen, which I did.

The kitchen was where the pit is now. It was a pretty nice kitchen, with an open-air tower at the top so a breeze could come through. Today's student eating area was the bar. For many years, Tassajara was a destination drinking spot. You'd drive the fourteen-mile dirt road, get a drink, and go to the hot tubs. Those were the days. The Tassajara dining room was where the kitchen is now. Bob and Anna Beck, the owners of Tassajara at the time, lived where the dining room is now; previously it had been divided into rooms.

As always it was hot in the summer. When you worked in the kitchen, you could order a Carta Blanca or a Dos Equis from the bar. Some cooks would have a gin and tonic with a twist of lime. If you were a cook, you wanted to stay cool and in good humor. Maybe it helped take the edge off.

Once our nearest neighbor drove the fourteen-mile dirt road all the way down into Tassajara. To get our attention, he drove his VW bug in a big circle in the parking lot, spinning his wheels and firing off his gun into the air.

I went out to check on the commotion. "Hey, Bill, can I get something for you?" I asked.

"I'm thirsty."

I offered him some Carta Blanca beer.

"Beer? Got any whiskey?"

After I'd brought out some glasses and a bottle labeled whiskey, he spit it out. "This isn't whiskey," he said, "it's Scotch."

That being corrected soon enough, after a drink or two, he was on his way.

I had a job washing dishes and scrubbing pots. Jimmie and Ray were making beautiful bread, so I asked, "Will you teach me?"

They said, "You bet."

Then I was dishwasher, pot scrubber, and baker. About halfway through the summer, one of the cooks quit. Bob and Anna then asked me, "Why don't you be the cook?" So I started cooking. That was the summer of 1966. I had two and a half months of experience cooking.

That fall, Zen Center arranged to buy Tassajara for $300,000. We had to raise $25,000 for a down payment. We had garage sales and car washes and a "Zenefit." The posters in San Francisco said "ZENEFIT" and showed the silhouette of one of the mountains from the ridge above Tassajara. Quicksilver Messenger Service, Jefferson Airplane, and Big Brother and the Holding Company played a benefit concert for the San Francisco Zen Center in the Avalon Ballroom. There were hundreds of people. I think the tickets were four

or five dollars. During a break in the music, Suzuki Roshi gave a talk to the hundreds of stoned hippies. We raised $1,800 from that Zenefit.

That winter there were three or four caretakers at Tassajara from the Zen Center. I have not, to this day, heard what happened, but they thought we needed to have a new kitchen before the next guest season. This was not accurate information, but they believed that to be true. They were not in close communication with the Zen Center in the city, as the phone was on a single wire running through the woods—if there was a storm and a branch fell on it, service was down until someone walked the line. In whatever state they were in, from whatever they were consuming, the caretakers decided, "We need a new kitchen before we open next year, so we'd better tear down the old one."

When we got down there the following April, what was left of the kitchen was a platform. There were three walk-in refrigerators left at the far side of the platform. You opened them at night to let cold air in and closed them during the day to keep it there. Refrigeration in the summer was down to about seventy rather than ninety degrees during the day.

The new temporary kitchen was where the dish shack is now. It had been the crew's dining room. Two people could pass around the central table if they turned sideways. There was a counter at the end, two stoves that are in the kitchen now, a smaller stove, a gas refrigerator, one little sink, and a whole wall of shelves. We built a storeroom outside, which is gone now. We did dishes outside on the porch. Brother David Steindl-Rast, a Benedictine monk, was the first dishwasher for the first practice period in the summer of 1967.

I attended the first seven practice periods at Tassajara in the old zendo, the meditation hall, which had been the bar. The dining room was torn down, and we started working on a new kitchen. We did everything ourselves. The first septic tank we dug by hand. It took weeks. Now we know to bring in a backhoe.

So I was at the first seven practice periods, at eleven of the first thirteen practice periods, and at Tassajara for the first seven summers. Three of those summers I worked in the kitchen. One summer I worked in the office. One summer I did stonework, and I was *shika* (the guest manager) for another.

The teachers I practiced with are gone now. Three of the seven *shusos* (head students) who led the first seven practice periods are also gone. The zendo I sat in isn't there any longer. The kitchen I worked in isn't there. We are only here for a few more moments—maybe not even a few more. Maybe this is our last moment. Suzuki Roshi, one morning when we were sitting, said: "Don't move. Just die over and over. Don't anticipate. Nothing can save you now, because this is your last moment. Not even enlightenment will help you now, because you have no other moments. With no future, be true to yourself—and don't move."[2]

What is it to be true to your self? We think the way to go through life is to create a picture of how we should be. We don't consciously create it, but we have it. We know how to be according to what we've been through, what we have experienced. We know how we should be so that we will get approval and avoid criticism and punishment. What do we need to do?

2 Edward Espe Brown, verbal memory. Quoted in *Zen Is Right Here: Teaching Stories and Anecdotes of Shunryu Suzuki,* ed. David Chadwick (Boulder, CO: Shambhala, 2007), 33.

It never works, does it? Abandoning yourself to gain recognition. Has it been working lately? You go through life putting on your best performance, yet something doesn't work. People still may not be happy with you. They have a problem. You have a problem. You are not the way you are supposed to be. You think that if you were spiritual and enlightened, then you wouldn't have the problems you are having, would you?

What do you suppose it's good for—this spirituality, this enlightenment, this realization? You think, *I will get it. I will have it. I will do what I need to do to get it. How do I perform so I look good, look spiritual, and everybody begins to approve of and recognize me for the masterful spiritual being that I am?*

There are various problems with this. For one, it doesn't work. You're doing the best you can. You're trying to be happy, buoyant, cheerful, calm, peaceful. *Don't get angry. Watch out for desire. Don't have any preferences.* See if you can regulate your mind. *Ah, I did it. I got my mind just the way it is supposed to be, and I have kept it that way for eighteen years.* You've got a grip on yourself, rather than a spiritual life.

Of course, you cannot do this. You cannot keep the mind you think you are supposed to have while you keep having experiences that you told yourself you weren't going to have anymore. It's like failed New Year's resolutions.

The other problem with this: If you got all that approval, what would it be good for? Who cares? How will you get out of this worrying about audience approval?

It's like Calvin of *Calvin and Hobbes* going to his dad and saying, "Dad, your approval ratings are down."

His dad says, "Excuse me, Calvin, but I'm not aiming for high approval ratings. I'm aiming to raise you to be a good person."

And Calvin says, "Your approval ratings are not going to improve with that attitude."

The other problem here is that you are missing what you truly long for. What do you long for most deeply? What do human beings long for? It's your heart. Something comes into your heart and touches you. Your heart extends out to meet others and the world. Then the world and others and you come into your heart.

You think, *I could love myself if I got enough approval.* And when will that be? Maybe you could just go ahead and love somebody who doesn't quite measure up—the person you are, who doesn't quite measure up. Maybe you could go ahead and have a kind feeling, a tenderhearted feeling for this poor, miserable person, who still doesn't measure up, still hasn't gotten anywhere, still isn't always calm, patient, tolerant, blissful, buoyant, cheerful, kind.

Over and over again, I have shifted. How do I have a tender feeling for myself? At some point, what is in your heart? What is your deep wish, the most important point, as Suzuki Roshi called it? What is the most important point? You answer, not once and for all, but simply for right now. What is it? You might have a feeling, a thought, a sensation. You might get a little hint. When you keep listening, your heart reveals itself more and more. *What is most important?* Something comes to you when you ask.

Suzuki Roshi was not masterful, except when he chose to be. Occasionally, he thought telling us something might help us—"Don't move. Just die." I was talking with Alan Winter

on the bridge. He was remembering when there were no benches and only a little wooden railing. Back in the sixties or early seventies, Suzuki Roshi was standing on the bridge when Alan came through with a group of friends from the Narrows, a deep rocky canyon made by the winding path of Tassajara Creek two miles east of the monastery.

Suzuki Roshi turned around and looked at them and smiled, and Alan said he felt deeply received, met, and seen. Many of us had this experience with Suzuki Roshi.

Beyond your performance, who are you? Maybe you can find a tender, vulnerable, good-hearted person—also boundless and vast—who is ready to see and be seen, someone who is ready to smile.

Easy Is Right

Funny thing—you start sitting, and your life unfolds. Sitting meditation is beyond your conception, beyond your agency. It's beyond your doing or structuring. You sit down here, and your life unfolds without your directing it. That's the good news, and the bad news: it's out of your control. And isn't that great? If it were up to you to control things, how utterly challenging that would be with so many things "misbehaving." You might not appreciate their liveliness while you are busy wanting them to be peaceful, calm, or serene. Your life opens up and you become more interested in how things are manifesting, as you stop telling them to be different than they are.

To talk about posture, I'd like to mention a Taoist saying by Chuang Tzu. He said: "Easy is right. Begin right, and you are easy. Continue easy, and you are right. The right way to go easy is to forget the right way, and to forget the way is easy." Ease is one of the traditional Buddhist virtues. Ease is a feeling of happiness or well-being, a sense of making yourself at home in your body and mind and welcoming your experience home to your heart.

There are different points of view about home. How do you make yourself at home in your body? One way is to make it a comfortable place to hang out. You help your body

find its stability so that you can feel at home and be easy in it. "Begin right, and you are easy." You begin by establishing your stability and balance, and then you have ease. "Continue easy, and you are right." This is different from *How do I do this right?* (as though right were something moral or conceptual that you could judge right or wrong, good or bad). You could be at ease, and Chuang Tzu says that to be at ease is right. Make yourself at home in your body and then welcome your experience home to your heart, into your being.

This welcoming attitude is a bit of a stretch for some of us because the things that come along are not all welcome. Some of them you'd just as soon they would go away. But this is a different sense of welcoming. It's like the Rumi poem that says, "Every morning a new arrival / A joy, a depression, a meanness . . . / Welcome and entertain them all! Even if they are here to clean you out."[3]

Begin right, and you will have ease. Continue easy, and you are right. The right way to go easy is to forget the right way, and to forget that it is easy. Otherwise, you might get discouraged when it's not so easy to have ease.

Ease—being at home in your body, in this life, in this place, in this time—is another word for welcoming things home to your heart, being willing to experience what is arising in this moment. Usually, we want to be sure the moment is doing what it is supposed to or what we'd like it to do before we are willing to have it. This is challenging. How can you be at ease when you are wondering, *Is it okay? Is it all right? Do I like this one? Can I be at ease with this?* You want to make sure before you are willing to be with it that it is a

3 Rumi, "The Guest House," *The Essential Rumi*, trans. Coleman Barks (New York: HarperCollins, 1997), 109.