

On Being a Priest

by Shunryu Suzuki Roshi, from unpublished lectures

When I was young, I wanted to remain celibate. I didn't want to get married because I knew myself so well, I knew what would happen to me if I got married. I thought it may be easier to remain alone to be a Buddhist. This is the easy way. But some people may think to get married as a Buddhist may be easier because one's wife will help him. So it may be easier. In some ways it is easier, but it makes it more difficult to be a good priest... At the time when I got married, it was a problem whether I should be a priest or a layman. I thought if I get married I will not be a priest anymore, or a monk anymore. So I had to think a lot... I think if you get married, your life will be more difficult. If you don't marry, your life will not be so difficult. That is also true for a priest or monk. To have a family is a great difficulty. So I don't think that is just a problem for a monk or for you, but a problem for everyone. If you get married, your life will be more difficult in one sense, but on the other hand you will have some advantage. That is how our human life goes, always not sweet. I think when Buddha said, "Our life is a life of suffering," that is very true. Anyway, we have suffering. As long as we seek for something good, we have suffering... It is easier for us to help others when we are single. In the Mahayana school, to help others comes first, and to help ourselves comes next, especially for a Mahayana priest... It is actually easier for a single person to practice our way. It is easier. It's much harder for a couple to practice our way. That's all... We are doing pretty well, I think, (with couples practicing at Zen Center) even though we have problems. And still, I think we need some single monks or nuns here. It is not so easy for a single person or a married couple here. But if you understand our life, if you are mature enough, maybe it is possible... When you become very idealistic – some of us are very idealistic – idealistics should stick to a single life, because they feel good. So you shouldn't compare single life to married life, we shouldn't say which is better, that is something which we shouldn't discuss so much. If we have good understanding, then we can live together, married couples and single people together... Many people have been doing pretty well (staying single). There must be some magic. And the magic is zazen practice. If you sit hard enough, you can be single. Zazen practice is a kind of magic. That is true. I am not single, so I cannot prove it, but many teachers have proved how to remain single, how to be an authentic monk, a Buddhist monk. The magic is zazen practice, that's all. When your foundation of life is based on individualism, that is not possible. When you believe in the oneness of man and woman, and non-duality, then that is possible. And how to actualize non-duality in our physical life is zazen practice.

I was disgusted with those priests (in Japan) who gave up their robes and changed their robes into suits to support themselves, when Dogen said we are protected from within, firmly; why do we expect support from outside? That is our spirit. But nowadays (some priests have) started to lose that kind of spirit. Most priests, I may say, in Japan, do not respect their way, their practice... A priest is not a priest any more if he is involved in dualistic practice—involved in busy life, busy world, busy mundane world—there is no more priest. Even though priests are there, they are not practicing the priest way. So, we say, "They cover their pan with the toilet lid." They have mixed up worldly practice and priest practice. That is how we lose our way. So when a priest observes our way like a priest, there is a priest. When we do not observe our way like a priest, we are a "toilet lid," not a lid of pots and pans. "To help others" does not mean to help others for your own convenience. Priests may be the most troublesome people, may be very difficult to handle. Even if they are offered a million dollars, they may say "oh, thank you." Even if only one penny, they will "thank you." They will say "thank you," that's all. It is very hard, difficult to handle. When people want a real priest, they should handle the priest carefully. They shouldn't mix up the priest with someone else. Though we should not lose this confidence within ourselves, we don't have to say it in words, but within ourselves we must have a strong confidence in Buddha's Way, and we should be supported from within, not from outside. So Buddhists should be Buddhist, completely. When a Buddhist really becomes Buddhist, he or she will be supported as a Buddhist.

The okesa is the symbol of oneness, the expression of this one goal, one spirit. Even though I receive this (new) okesa right now, even though I shaved my head a long, long time ago, I must shave my head again and again. Even though I received ordination a long, long time ago, still it is necessary to receive the okesa. Many many times, this kind of sincere practice; as long as you do not lose the sincerity of Way-seeking mind as the ultimate goal of a human being, then every time you do something, that practice will enrich your experience of Dharma and make your spirit stronger and stronger. And you will be a really a good example of a bodhisattva. It is never too late to receive a proper okesa. It is not too late for anyone to be ordained as a Buddhist. Here I say "Buddhist," but I don't mean any special religious group. Only do not neglect, only don't lose the spirit to attain the oneness of all being, including all monks, all animate and inanimate beings. You say "this religion or that religion," "layman or priest." Actually, all of us should eventually be priests—all of us, without any exception. All of us should be priests. But until you can accept priesthood from the bottom of the heart, you will be laymen. As Dogen Zenji said, right now we are teacher and disciple, but all of us are actually friends of Buddha. Those who have received the okesa already, you should appreciate the meaning of receiving it. And those who haven't, respect the okesa. And you should know that someday you will receive the okesa. And those who joined this family by chance may know some day what we are doing here. So if you practice our way with this kind of spirit, whatever you do, it makes sense. When you lose this spirit, you will be lost. Even though you wear the okesa, you will be lost. So to respect the truth is a very important thing. You shouldn't say "this or that" because each thing has some meaning as it is.