

Shunryū Suzuki-rōshi
Thursday, July 3, 1969
Tassajara

I have explained the poem about "Emptiness is form," or *shōchūhen*.¹ *Shō* is reality and *hen* is "form" or "seeming" [?]. *Shōchūhen*. And the next one is *henchūshō*,² the opposite. And *chū* means, you know—*chū* or *soku*—means some activity in which—not activity—some—not relationship, but something in which everything appears—every event, you know, appears. What will it be [laughs]? Something in which, you know, appears. Maybe say a little bit more [laughs]: something in which everything appears—something in which always appears—that is the present moment, right now. You know, right now, you know, things happen, not in past or present. So practice should be the practice of "right now." That is *chū* or *soku*.

When we, you know, catch things, you know—how you catch it, you know? You cannot—you cannot catch past or future, you know. You can catch just present moment, right now. If you want to catch someone, you know, you—you should catch him right now, not past or not in future.

So if you want to practice zazen, you know, you should practice it right now. That is *chū*. *Shōchūhen* or *henchūshō*. Or *Shiki soku ze ku*,³ you know. *Ku soku ze shiki*⁴ is, you know—is—means "right now there is being," you know.

But because we are always, you know, involved in thinking mind, and because we try to understand teaching, you know, in—with seeking mind, in term of present or past or, you know, now or later, you know, or always, you know. Usually "is" means "always so." "One plus one is two," you know. That "is" is always so. But our "is" or *soku ze*—"without changing," you know, "without waiting." You know, "A is B." That is actually what we mean. Right now it is so.

So we—if we, you know, catch things right now, "Form is emptiness,

¹ *shōchūhen*: The first of the *shōhengo*i, the five degrees or ranks of enlightenment, a system developed by Tōzan Ryōkai *et al.* One definition is "ultimate reality encompassing phenomena" (*The Japanese-English Zen Buddhist Dictionary*, Tōkyō: Sankibō, 1991, p. 684). Phenomena dominate consciousness, but they are experienced as a manifestation of fundamental reality (*Shambhala Dictionary of Buddhism and Zen*, p. 69).

² *henchūshō*: The second of the *shōhengo*i: "phenomena encompassing ultimate reality" (*Sankibō, ibid.*). Nondistinction becomes prominent; multiplicity fades (*Shambhala, ibid.*).

³ From the *Heart Sūtra*: "Form is emptiness."

⁴ From the *Heart Sūtra*: "Emptiness is form."

and emptiness is form" because we catch it right now. Because we practice right now zazen, you know, not future or not past, we are Buddha himself. It does not mean—"Form is emptiness" does not mean "some day [laughs] we will—we will attain." That is, you know, right understanding of "Form is emptiness."

So in empty screen, you know, you will see many pictures—the projected pictures. Without screen you cannot see anything. Because of the screen, you can see many things. What is that screen now [laughs], you know? Screen is just parable, you know. In this parable, what do you mean by screen?

This is a kind of a training of your mind, you know, comparing your thinking faculty and non-thinking activity. The screen is "right now." Without screen you cannot see anything. You cannot have direct experience of anything, you know. Only by the screen you can see things. Only you, you know—the way you have direct experience of something is to experience it right now, not future or not past time. Do you understand?

So when you count your breathing: "one, two, three"—means "right now, right now, right now, right now." "Right now" is "one, two, three." It means that you never lose your practice. You will not be so rigid, you know, to try to do it in the future time, but right now. Whatever condition you are, you know, you should do it. Even though you are sleepy, when you do it, you know, you have direct experience of zazen practice. So, you know, this is—it looks like very rigid formula of—formula, but what it means is very direct and very clear: much clearer than, you know, formula of mathematics.

"Two plus two is four" is not so clear, you know, and it is not always so. But "Form is emptiness, and emptiness is form" is very accurate. Only you are not familiar of this kind of, you know, formula. You think this is just formula, you know [laughs]. You are—you will not be interested in—in it so much because [partial word]—if you—but if you become very sincere with your practice you will understand this formula [as being] very accurate and very explicit.

It means—*chū* or *soku ze* means "right now," or "practice"—real practice which you do right now. Okay? You know, so "Form is emptiness," you know. Right now it is so, but it is not always so. Do you understand? You don't understand [laughs, laughter]. Let me have a cup of [laughs] water. You have to think.

Wave and water, you know—right now, you know, it is—wave is water, water is wave. But if you think about it, if you have the idea of water and idea of wave because you saw it, you know —because you saw the wave and you have idea of water—here. And you may think: "But

that is water. Water is something like this, you know." [May be referring to his cup of water.] But right now when you see waves on the water, wave is water and water is wave, right now—when you don't think.

What, what—that you think means, you know, you track [?] some movement, you know, activity and analyze wave from water. That is what you do when you think. But right now, you know [laughs], when you [*whack*—sounds like he hits one palm with his stick] hear the sound, that is—so that is, we say [*whack, whack*]. You know, which hand [laughs] make sound? [*Whack.*] Right now [laughs], you know, you cannot say which. Maybe this hand, maybe that hand, or maybe both [*clap*—sounds like he claps hands together]. You don't know. That is reality.

But when you think after you hear the, you know, sound, there is right hand and left hand and sound. But [*whack*], you know [*whack*], this time here, you know, right now sound is hand, hand is sound. Hands are sound.

So this, you know, *chū* or *soku ze* is very, very important. That is why Dōgen-zenji left [?] *Shōbōgenzō* explaining "this moment, this moment, this moment." So "What does it mean?" is very important. It is a point by which our teaching, you know, means something.

If we lose this point, your practice doesn't work. Whatever teaching it may be, it doesn't work. That is "someone's," you know, teaching or teaching which you had long time ago. Or teaching which we will understand, you know, "sometime after" [laughs]—"someday." "Someday is no-day," we say [laughs]. Various [?] day after tomorrow [laughs]. "Day after tomorrow we will do it [laughs]. Day after tomorrow we will do it [laughs]." That is, you know—if you lose this point, nothing works.

Now the poem for the second statement—"Form is emptiness." By the way, when you say "Emptiness is form, and form is emptiness," you know, those two statements, you know, makes complete sense, you know. Even though you say—when you say—when you just say, for an instance, "Sugar is something which is sweet," you know, there may be something, you know, besides sugar which can be sweet. But relationship between, you know, waves and water, you know—"There is no water except wave; there is no wave except water. So "Sugar is sweet"—statement "Sugar is sweet"—is not complete statement. The waves, you know, when you can say both way: "Waves and—is water and water is waves." Then water and waves are completely same thing, you know. If it is not same thing you cannot say in two ways.

So it means—when we say "Emptiness is form," it is, you know, more

stronger. It means, you know, you cannot escape from this. You have no reason not to practice zazen. If you don't practice zazen, you know, you are not buddha because you are not in complete relationship between buddha and you. If you don't do that, you—it is like a water without wave. There is no such water exist, you know. If it is water it must have some, you know, wave. Even though you cannot see it, you know, there must be some waves.

So Dōgen-zenji says: "Even though you are buddha, if you don't practice zazen, you are not buddha." [Bangs stick on table once for each of several preceding words.] Or you may say the other in this way: "If," you know, you miss this point" or if you understand yourself on this moment right now [bangs stick on table once for each of several preceding words], without moving anything—without moving even—without having even blink of—what—blinking [laughs]? What do you call this? Hmm?

Student: "Blink."

Suzuki-rōshi: Blink [laughs]. Blink of eyes, you know, you cannot, you are not buddha. Without—without having blink, if you practice zazen, or if you do something, you are buddha.

There is no such buddha like dead buddha. Dead buddha is only exist in your mind—not—but actually, you know, there is no such thing exist. Something exists is—something and buddha. [Ohh.] Do you understand that? [Laughter.] Huh? [Laughs.]

So you have no reason why, you know, you are not buddha as long as you alive—as you are taking breathing—because form is emptiness and emptiness is form. That this world exist is because you are doing something right now, you know. That is why exist. Right now you are —because you are doing something.

But—but when you think about it—about our world—it is not real world—the world produced by thinking mind. Isn't that so [laughs]? So we should not be deluded by some idea which we just produce by thinking mind. By direct experience we should be buddha. That is what it means.

Okay.

The poem says:⁵

⁵ From the Mahāyāna *Shūrangāma Sūtra (Ryōgon-kyō)*, "The Sūtra of the Heroic One." See, e.g., Philip Kapleau, *The Three Pillars of Zen*, pp. 57-60. The tale is not in verse form in the Sanskrit/Chinese versions, so Suzuki-rōshi is probably translating from the Japanese *Ryōgon-kyō*.

At dawn an ignorant old woman
finds ancient mirror.

There was story in India—there were an old woman called Enyadatta [?]-Enyadatta. And he—he—she used to, you know, see herself in—in her old mirror. And she liked to see her beautiful face—or her beautiful eyes and eyebrow in the mirror. But one day she couldn't see the beautiful eyes in the mirror. So she was—she became crazy, you know, at seeing—when she thought she lost her beautiful, you know, eyes or face—eyes.

This is the story which we should understand first.

At dawn an ancient old woman
finds ancient mirror

wherein she clearly sees her face
which cannot be elsewhere.

And this is the second one [line?]. And next one is:

No more will she reject her head
by grasping at its shadow.

"An old woman" means "form." An old ignorant woman means "form" or "seeming" or "attribute" opposite to the reality or original face. "At dawn"—early in the morning—"ignorant old woman find her ancient mirror." It means that, you know, form—the old man⁶ and mirror is one.

When she, you know, see herself into the mirror, you know, she is the image in the mirror, and image in the mirror is herself. So it means "form is emptiness." Emptiness is old mirror, or original face, or emptiness. So here, old woman is—it means old woman is emptiness or original face.

The next line is:

Clearly, wherein the—wherein she clearly sees her face
which cannot be elsewhere.

This is the translation. This translation may be too beautiful, you know. If you are rigid—if you translate it literally:

"Clearly it is," you know, "nothing but the reality," you know.

⁶ Enyadatta is female in the Japanese version of the tale and male (Yajñadatta or Vajradatta) in the original Indian tale.

Both is nothing but reality. She is mirror. Mirror is she. Image in the mirror is herself and herself is in image in the mirror. If you take her as a subject of the sentence, it means "emptiness is form, and clearly it is—they are nothing but the reality."

This is next line:

No more will she reject her head
by grasping at his shadow.

The har- [partial word]—

No more will she reject her head
by grasping at its shadow.

When she—she saw her eyes, you know, in the mirror, she was very happy. So she—she was grasping her head, in other words. And she, you know—but she rejected her head, you know, when she couldn't see her face in the mirror. So it means, you know, she thought—she took one and rejected another. But actually they are the same.

Tentatively, you may understand this way, you know: Early in the morning an old woman had a mirror. And old woman and image in the mirror is one. So it is foolish of her to reject, you know, her original—her own face, you know, accepting the face in the mirror. Even though, for some reason, she couldn't see her own face in the mirror, it does not mean she lost her face [laughs].

So—tentatively, you know, I want you to understand this way. But actually the story we have in Indian sūtra *Shūrangām-dharani*, you know.⁷

There were an old [wo]man, you know, who enjoyed to see her image—her face in the mirror. But when she, you know, wanted to see her beautiful, you know, eyes and eyebrow on her head, you know, it is not possible to see her face [laughs]. So even though she tried to see her eyes, you know—which she see, and eyebrow, you know—it is not possible to see, you know. But she became very discouraged when she couldn't see her beautiful eyes on his head without a mirror. And she became crazy. That was more like original story. I don't know which—which is true story but—

⁷ "The Buddha said, 'Did you hear about Yajñadatta from Shrāvastī who on impulse one morning held a mirror to his face and fell in love with the head in the mirror? He gazed at the eyes and eyebrows but got angry because he could not see his own face. He decided he must be a mountain or river sprite, lost control, and ran madly about'" (*Shūrangāma Sūtra*, *Taisho Tripitaka*, No. 945; translation by the Buddhist Text Translation Society).

If we understand in that way—to reject her—not to reject her face—oh yeah, it—it means, you know, because she couldn't—just because she couldn't see, you know, her own beautiful eyes, but that is real, you know, eyes—that is "form," you know. And that is nothing but the mirror [image?] she will see, almost all the time, in the old mirror. Old mirror means "reality."

So maybe better to understand this story in this way. Do you—did I explain [laughing] pretty well to make sense for you?

One story is, you know, she thought—when she thought she couldn't see her own face in the mirror, so she became crazy. Another one is: she—after seeing her beautiful face in the mirror, you know, he—she tried to see her own, you know, eyes and eyebrow on his—on her head [laughs], which is not possible. And she couldn't see, so she became crazy.

Anyway, this is just parable—parable, so—I don't mind which—whichever is true. But anyway it means that what you see, you know, right now, in this moment, is also reality—not after or not before. The right now, what you see, is reality.

Now when I come to America, you know—when I came to America, I didn't ask any information about Soko-ji temple. And at that time, there was no Zen Center [laughs]. So I have no way to ask what is Zen Center, but I could ask, you know, "Where is San Francisco?" at least. But I didn't, you know, study anything about San Francisco because I accepted to go to San Francisco, wherever the city is. I thought: "If I go there [laughs], I will find out with my eyes [laughs] what is San Francisco and what kind of temple Soko-ji is.

So only when you, you know—it is, you know—it may help, you know, but we shouldn't be too much interested in someone's talk, you know, or someone's rumor about future—future life. If you go there you will find it.

Maybe I am a kind of extremist [laughs, laughter]. Maybe it—it is better to know, you know, something about what we will—where we will go. But that kind of information—informations doesn't help you so much. And it will create your prejudice, you know, which will disturb—which will be a disturbance for your intuitive—intuition, I think.

Now, at this moment, is very important point.

The next one [of the *shōhengo*] is: "Form is form." *Shōchūrai*.

"Form is form" or *Shōchūrai*. *Shō* is "emptiness."⁸ *Chū* is "right now," or "is." *Rai* is "come." So seeming in—according to Charles Luk⁹—seeming unite—uniting with the real—seeming uniting ...¹⁰

[Sentence not finished. Tape turned over.]

... as emptiness. That which exist is just emptiness, you know. It is utter darkness where you cannot see anything in it. That is *shōchūrai*. It is enlightenment itself, in which anything doesn't [1-2 words unclear].

When someone, you know, attained enlightenment, he couldn't hear anything for three days, you know, or he couldn't see anything. Whatever he saw, things doesn't make any—made any sense, you know. It is the stage where you cannot find any particular meaning to things you see, or when you are completely detached from things you see. So for him, you know, things appears just like utter darkness. What he see is utter darkness. No perceptual world. Even in your zazen, you know, when your—you have very good *shikantaza*, and if you hear the bird sing outside, there is no distance between you and bird. And you—actually you are not hearing the bird. And the bird is not anywhere—anywhere special—not on the tree, or across the stream, or on the wall—just [laughs], you know, sound—beautiful sound [laughs].

That is, you know—you may say that is "bird." But it is not even a bird. Afterwards, you know, you may say: "That was bird. It was very beautiful." But at that time it was not even a bird [laughs]. That is something like this. Or you—you don't even move, you know [laughs]. Just sound. *Shhh*. That is, you know, *shōchūrai*. In—in the new *Japanese-English Buddhist Dictionary* it says:¹¹

"Even in the state in which discriminative thinking is transcended, there exist power to manifest the function of all the phenomenal—phenomena."

"Even in the stage—the state in which discriminative thinking is

⁸ *Shō* means "emptiness" in the case of the third stage, "the fundamental" in the case of the second, and "the absolute" in the case of the first—i.e., it is used as the opposite of *hen* (*Shambhala Dictionary*, p. 69).

⁹ Suzuki-rōshi may be referring to Charles Luk's *Śūraṅgama Sūtra* (Leng Yen Ching), London: Rider and Company, 1966, or *Ch'an and Zen Teaching*, London: Rider and Company, 1960.

¹⁰ *The Japanese-English Zen Buddhist Dictionary*, 1991, defines this stage as "ultimate realty alone" (p. 684). In this stage, one no longer has an awareness of body and mind: both drop away (*Shambhala Dictionary*, p. 69).

¹¹ Daitō Shuppansha Publishing Company, 1965. Suzuki-rōshi is reading its definition of *shōchūrai*.

transcended, there exist power to manifest the function of all phenomena." The thinking or sensational world is—is already transcended completely, but still it has—still there exist—or there will be the manifestation of sound or color. Even though there are sound or color, you know, it is just same as no sound because that is the world of sound only or color only, you know. When it is color only, you know, it doesn't make any sense [laughs]. It is just one color only, you know. If something—if, you know, some—something just happened in that way. If sound—in the world of sound only—do you understand? The world of sound only—there is nothing but a sound—one sound—one sound of the bird.

That is the, you know, that sound is completely different sound from the sound you may hear in term of good or bad—or in term of who made that sound. Do you understand the difference? The difference between you have in everyday life, in usual sense, and the things you will hear in complete zazen. In the world of "things only," or "sound only," you hear. You cannot hear the sound—that kind of "sound only" or "sound only" when you are involved in, you know, lazy practice: "What time will it be?" "I am very sleepy this morning." "I should stay in bed more so that I can have good practice [laughs, laughter] next time," you know. In that kind of zazen [laughs], you will not hear the bird—the bird of sound only.

This poem says—oh:

Hard though it be,
there is no way to—there—there is no way to keep free from
dust.¹²

Tonight's ability to avoid what is forbidden—

There is no—oh [sorting through notes]—

Hard—hard though it be,
there is a way to keep free from dust.

Today's ability to avoid what is forbidden
surpasses yesterday's most eloquent discussion.

This is also—is not literal translation. "Hard though it be, there is a way to keep free from dust." If you translate it literally, "There is the way to keep yourself from dust."

It means that in—excuse me—can—there is a way to keep emptiness from dust. The "emptiness" means "original face" or "emptiness." And "dust" means the dualistic thinking mind. "There is a way—there

¹² Note.—Translated as a positive statement immediately below (i.e., there is a way).

is a way to keep our empty mind—to keep our emptiness from the dust of dualistic thinking mind." It is more, you know, literal translation.

"Today's ability—today's ability to avoid what is forbidden—what is forbidden. Today's ability, you know, to avoid what is forbidden" means, you know, we don't call [say] Emperor's name, you know. You call, you know, very intimately, friendly pres- [partial word]—name of the President, you know. But in China or in Japan, you know, we don't call Emperor's name by his first name, and he has no—he has no second name. He has just, you know, first name, and we don't call [say] his first name, even.

So "to avoid what is forbidden" means, you know, not to have the—not to call emptiness by name of many things, you know, like: "I attained enlightenment." Or, "Enlightenment experience is something difficult." And, "I have attained enlightenment." And, "This is big enlightenment." And, "This is minor enlightenment." [Laughs.] If you say so, it means that you—you couldn't avoid what is forbidden. You called the name of what—you called forbidden name [laughs].

So if—if someone ask you what is emptiness, you know, there is no way to say what it is. If you say something, that is not all—that is not emptiness itself. We should know that, you know .

Hmm. I think I have to explain this point, you know, next night—next time. There is many misunderstanding in this area, you know. When you say, you know: "it is not possible," word is very—word has just limited sense, and there is some limit. It will give some limitation to—to the reality, you know.

Even though I say: "Water is cold" [laughing]—but if you don't drink it, you don't understand actually what is—what is water. This is just, you know—

But when we say words is—when we say—we do not say—explain the limitation of the word, but we use words to point out the reality. So we do not mean to reject the word, or to reject our head. We should not reject our head. We should not reject our word even though it is not perfect.

And if you talk about limitation of, someone thinks: "If he thinks—if he talk about how imperfect ability—how poor ability it has—our thinking mind, our words—is, you know, Zen," you know, it is not so. If he is real Zen student, he should be able to point out, you know, by word, what is emptiness or what is enlightenment. At least he should try to do so instead of rejecting word—instead of rejecting the intellectual understanding of sūtra. This point is very important because there are

many people who make this kind of mistake. Just talking about "word" is no good [laughs]. The intellectual understanding is—doesn't mean anything. It is so poor it—we cannot communicate by words. The only way is to attain enlightenment. Unless you sit and attain enlightenment, you cannot study Zen [laughs]. So I don't explain what it is. "Just sit!" This is, you know, another mistake. If you understand zazen in that way, that is also a mistake.

Thank you very much.

Source: City Center transcript entered onto disk by Jose Escobar, 1997. Transcript checked against tape and made verbatim by Katharine Shields (7/10/00) and Bill Redican (7/18/00).