

Shunryū Suzuki-rōshi
"LETTERS FROM EMPTINESS"
HOW TO UNDERSTAND THE IDEA OF EMPTINESS
Sunday, March 8, 1970
San Francisco

[Recently my thought is concentrated on the idea of emptiness.]¹
Whatever I say, I am actually talking about what is emptiness, because this emptiness is something which we must understand literally and completely through experience. But if it is difficult to experience it through experience, you can tentatively understand it as a kind of idea in comparison to your way of thinking or in comparison to the idea you have, [the] various idea you have.

And we classify our idea in two: one is idea of emptiness, another is idea of being. And when we say, usually, idea it is idea of being. And the idea of—your way of thinking belongs to the idea of being, and idea of emptiness makes a pair of opposite with your idea you—ideas you have. So whatever the idea may be, you can say those idea is idea of being. So we should know that.

Besides the ideas about things you have, there is another—another ideas which is not same as—same—which is not same idea you have and which is not brought about in your concept. Actually that is why we practice zazen, you know. You cannot reach the idea of emptiness with your thinking mind or with your feeling as an conception. And to practice—to actualize the emptiness is *shikantaza*.

This morning I want to point—I want to point out some points in our usual understanding what kind of mistake there is and how different idea Buddhists have. We say emptiness is—in Japanese or Chinese is *kū*.² *Kū* is, of course, a noun, and it is—sometime we use it as a verb, *kūzuru*. *Kūzuru* means—is verb and maybe—so you can say "empty"—you can use words "empty" in two ways. One is noun and the other is verb. "To empty." To empty is—to empty a cup is to empty, you know, maybe.

But when we say "empty a cup" or "empty water" does not mean to drink it up [laughs]. It means that keeping the water in it, and still we do not think there is water. That is to empty the water. When we have no idea of water, even though we see is, that is to empty a cup.

So to empty everything means to have no idea of anything, or to go back to the situation where no idea of anything arise. We may, you

¹ The text in brackets is not on tape. It was apparently added by the original transcriber.

² Sanskrit *shūnyatā*.

know, think of some kōans—to hear a bird before bird sing, or—this is also difficult word: *shōsoku*.³ *Shōsoku* means some [laughs]—it is also still difficult—I don't know how to express it. *Shōsoku*, you know —when you receive a letter from your, you know, from your home, that is *shōsoku*, you know. Receive a letter, receiving a letter, and to know something about your home is *shōsoku*: what are they doing [laughs] now, or what kind of flower they have now, what kind of things they are involved in. That is *shōsoku*, you know, to—without any actual, you know, actual picture of it, to know something about it is *shōsoku*. So, you know, we have no letter from the world of emptiness [laughs, laughter]. We have no letter, but to know, you know, what is going on in the world of emptiness [laughs], that is *shōsoku*.

To communicate with the world of emptiness is to, you know—that is maybe enlightenment, you know. When you see the plum flower, or when you hear the sound of bamboo which hit by a small stone, and, you know, that is a letter from the world of emptiness. And to know [laughs], you know, the world of emptiness through this sign is, you know, *shōsoku*. So it is not actual written communication, but it is something, you know, some hint or some suggestion. Through this kind of suggestion to know what is going on in the world of emptiness is maybe so-called-it enlightenment.

There is this kind of world, you know, besides the world which we can describe. Originally, all the description of reality is limited—should be limited expression of the world of emptiness, but we are so attached to the description, you know, and we think this is the reality. There there is some mistake, because what is described is not the actual reality. And when you think this is reality, there is your own idea involved in it. There, you know, there is some idea of self. Idea of self is involved in it when you say "this is it"—that this is a description and this—some description is it when you say so, already your idea is involved in it.

When Buddhist study was not completed, many Buddhists, you know, made this kind of mistake. That is why they attach to the written scriptures or Buddha's words. And they thought this is the most valuable thing and the way to preserve the teaching is to remember what Buddha said.

But actually what Buddha said was the letter, you know, from the world of emptiness. So letter is just suggestion, you know, or some, you know, help to think of his home. But if you read—if someone else read it—some other person read it, it doesn't make any sense, you know. That is—that is the nature of Buddha's words. How to read—or if you want to read a letter from the Buddha's world, it is necessary to be ready for understanding what is Buddha's world. So to understand

³ *shōsoku* (Jap.): (1) state of affairs; (2) news, correspondence, letters.

Buddha's—what is Buddha's world, it is necessary not to rely on usual thinking mind.

And I have to go back to the verb "to empty." "To empty" means without relying on the form or color of being, to have direct, pure experience of it is *kūzuru* or to empty. To—what should be empty is our preconceived idea, or our idea of being, or our idea of big or small, round or square. This kind of, you know, round or square, or big or small is not reality, you know. It doesn't belong to the reality. Round or square or long or short is some idea.

The idea is when we analyze our experience. When we analyze our experience, you know, this kind of time or space or big and short or heavy and light—this kind of, you know, scale is necessary. And with those scale in your mind, you actually, you know, experience things. But thing itself is—has no scale or no weight. It is something, you know, we add to the things—reality. So the idea is analyzed—when you analyze your experience, there is, you know, idea of time and space. And because we use this kind of a scale always, you know, and we depend on the scale so much that we think this kind of scale is, you know, exist, but [laughs] it doesn't exist. It is, you know—if it exist, it should exist with things, with being. Things itself is mother of the scale in itself. Actually it is so. Or you may say, you know, scale is mother of being, you know. Both is true. If both is true, then scale and being is one being. It is actually one thing, you know, one reality. One reality could be analyzed as some entity, some substance, and the idea we have—the sense of big or small.

So this kind of—when we have idealize something, when we conceptualize something, it is already, you can—it is already dead experience. It is not actual experience. And why we, you know, why we empty things—being—what we empty is not actual reality, but the idea of big or small, or good or bad. This part should be empty because it is some measurement we have. And that measurement [is] usually based on—usually used in a selfish way. When we say "good" or "bad," you know, scale is in yourself. That scale is not always same. According to the person, the scale is different.

So there is—I don't say that is always wrong, but mostly we are liable to use our selfish scale when we analyze—when we idealize something, when we have idea of something. That part should be emptied. We must empty this part. How we empty this part is to practice zazen, and we—we should be more got accustomed to accept things as it is without any idea of big or small, good or bad.

If some artist or some writer to, you know, actualize something or to actualize his, you know, experience, it isn't—they may use—they may write something, they may paint, but if his, you know, experience is

very strong and pure, you know, he will give up [laughs] description. "Oh." [Laughs.] "Oh my." That's all. [Laughs.] He—he will give up, because his, you know, experience is so pure and so realistic that—realistic I don't know [laughs] this words is correct or not—so actual that he sh- [partial word]—he have to give up: "Oh no-no-no-no." [Laughs.]

You know, I like to make some, you know, miniature garden, you know, in—around my house, but if—if I go, you know, to the stream and seeing wonderful rocks and water running, I give up [laughs, laughter]. "Oh no!" [Laughs, laughter.] "I shall never try to," you know, "make rock garden." When my friend who was a gardener, you know—he is very much proud of his, you know, art. And when he came to Tassajara, he said: "I shall never [laughs] work on rock garden" he said. "It is much better to clean Tassajara stream, you know, picking up if there is some paper—picking up paper and cigarette. That is much better. I shall never work on ..." [*Sentence not finished. Tape turned over.*]

[Japanese garden." That is very true.]⁴ We copy nature, you know, in the small area. That is maybe Japanese garden, but in nature there is, you know, actual beauty which is beyond beauty. If you—because you see a part of it, you may think this rock should be, you know, moved this way [laughs], and this rock should be moved that way. Then it will be a complete garden, you may say. But if you see from the distance, you know, and if you see more wider area, you know, without moving anything, that is complete garden.

Because you, you know, limit the actual reality with small self, there is "good garden" or "bad garden," and you should change some stones. But if you see the things itself as it is with wider mind, with wider view, there is no need to do anything.

So things itself is emptiness, actually. But because you add some, you know, something to it, it—it doesn't—actually you spoil the actual reality. So if we don't spoil anything, that is to empty things. So if you sit—when you sit in *shikantaza*, we say don't [be] disturbed by sound, don't operate your thinking mind. It means that don't rely on any sense organs or thinking mind and just, you know, receive the letter from the world of emptiness. That is *shikantaza*.

So to empty—usually when we deny something, we, at the same time, we—we replace some—something else, you know. That I deny, you know, a blue cup means I want—that I want white cup. That is [laughs] usually what is happening. When you discuss something, when you argue, you know, that you deny someone's opinion means

⁴ The text in brackets is not on tape. It was apparently added by the original transcriber.

[laughs] to force your opinion to others. That is usually what we are doing, but in—our way is not like that, you know. We just correct the, you know, some added, you know, element in your observation of things, and—and we purify this kind of selfish idea. To see, to accept things as it is is our way. So we d- [partial word]—there is no need to replace, you know, something.

So to deny is to make it clear and to make it more actual. That is what we mean by empty things. If we empty things and let things be as it is, then things will work. Originally things are related, and things are originally one. So as one being, it will extend itself. So how let things extend itself is, you know, why we empty things.

This kind of practice is missing in our religious practice. So religion naturally will become like a sometime opium, you know, because of lack of this kind of practice. If we have this kind of practice without any idea of religion we have religion. So to purify our experience and to observe things as it is, is to have—to understand the world of emptiness and to understand why Buddha left so many teaching for us.

So naturally in our practice, in our *shikantaza*, we do not seek for anything because when we seek for something there, there is, you know, our idea of self. Our idea of self is involved in our practice. So that practice is—will not work to purify our experience, to purify our life. So how, you know, we get rid of this kind of tendency is the point we make effort.

When we say "to make our effort," you know, means to push, you know, the idea of self to achieve something. That is [laughs], you know, actually what you are doing when you make some effort, but we make our effort to get rid of this kind of self-centered effort or self-centered activity.

You know, for an instance, you know, if you are writing—reading something, someone may say—your wife or husband [laughs] may say—may say something to you: "Why don't you have a cup of tea?" [Laughs.] You may say, "Oh, I am busy! [Laughing.] Be quiet!" That is not—when you are, you know, reading in that way, I think you should be careful [laughs, laughter]. You should be ready to say, "Yes, that may be wonderful. Give me a cup of tea." And having a cup of tea or stop reading, and after having a cup of tea you should continue your reading.

That kind of attitude is more like our attitude. "Now I am very busy!" [Laughs.] I shouldn't say so, you know, but I always say, "I am busy now. Right now I am busy." [Laughs.] That is not so good, because my mind is not actually in full function. A part of my mind is working

hard, but the other part is—may not be working so hard. Anyway, I may be losing balance in my activity.

If it is reading, it is o- [partial word]—it may be okay, but if you are, you know, making calligraphy, you know [laughs]—calligraphy, you know, express yourself, you know, completely. If your mind is not in a state of emptiness, you know, your work tell you, "I am [laughs] not in state of emptiness." So you should stop. If you are a Zen student, you should be ashamed of making [laughs] such calligraphy. As a Zen student, you know, calligraphy—to make calligraphy is to practice zazen actually [laughs]. Your practice should be there. So when you are working on calligraphy, if someone say, "Please have a cup of tea." "No, I am making calligraphy!" [Laughs, laughter.] Then your calligraphy will say, "No! No! No!" [Laughs, laughter.] You cannot, you know, fool yourself [laughs]. That is our practice, you know.

I think you must understand—you may—you might understand what we are trying here in Zen Center. Sometime it may be all right to practice zazen as—as a kind of exercise [laughs] or training, you know, to make your practice stronger or to make your breathing smooth—smooth and natural. That is, maybe, a part of practice, but when we say *shikantaza*, you know, our practice is not that kind of practice. So we put more—we put more emphasis on this point. Only when you have this point, various practice will work.

Thank you very much.

Source: City Center transcript entered onto disk by Jose Escobar, 1997. Checked against tape and made verbatim by Dana Velden and Bill Redican (10/2/00).