

Shunryū Suzuki-rōshi
"LETTERS FROM EMPTINESS"
HOW TO UNDERSTAND THE IDEA OF EMPTINESS
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This lecture was the source for the chapter of *Not Always So* called "Letters from emptiness" on p. 35.

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 ideas you have.

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

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

This morning 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—in Japanese or Chinese it is *kū*.¹ *Kū* is, of course, a noun, and sometimes we use it as a verb, *kūzuru*. *Kūzuru* is a verb so you can use the word "empty" in two ways. One is noun and the other is verb. "To empty." To empty is—to empty a cup, 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 it, 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 arises. We may think of some *kōans*—to hear a bird before the bird sings. This is also a difficult word: *shōsoku*.² *Shōsoku* means [laughs]—it is also still difficult—I don't know

¹ Sanskrit *shūnyatā*.

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

how to express it. *Shōsoku*—when you receive a letter from your home, that is *shōsoku*. 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*—without any actual picture of it, to know something about it is *shōsoku*. So we have no letter from the world of emptiness [laughs, laughter]. We have no letter, but to know what is going on in the world of emptiness [laughs], that is *shōsoku*.

To communicate with the world of emptiness—that is maybe enlightenment. When you see the plum flower, or when you hear the sound of bamboo which is hit by a small stone, that is a letter from the world of emptiness. And to know [laughs] the world of emptiness through this sign is *shōsoku*. So it is not actual written communication, but it is something, 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 enlightenment.

There is this kind of world besides the world which we can describe. Originally, all the description of reality is a limited expression of the world of emptiness, but we are so attached to the description, 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 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 description is it when you say so—already your idea is involved in it.

When Buddhist study was not completed, many Buddhists 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 from the world of emptiness. So letter is just a suggestion, or some help to think of his home. But if some other person read it, it doesn't make any sense. 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 what is Buddha's world, it is necessary not to rely on the 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. 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 round or square, or big or small is not reality. 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, this kind of time or space or big and short or heavy and light—

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

When we have idealized something, when we conceptualize something, it is already a dead experience. It is not the actual experience. And why we empty things—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 used in a selfish way. When we say "good" or "bad," the scale is in yourself. That scale is not always the same. According to the person, the scale is different.

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 an idea of something. That part should be emptied. We must empty this part. How we empty this part is to practice zazen, and we should be more accustomed to accept things as it is without any idea of big or small, good or bad.

If some artist or some writer were to actualize something or to actualize his experience—they may write something, they may paint, but if his experience is very strong and pure, he will give up [laughs] description. "Oh." [Laughs.] "Oh my." That's all. [Laughs.] He will give up, because his experience is so pure and so realistic that—realistic I don't know [laughs] if this word is correct or not—so actual that he has to give up: "Oh no-no-no-no." [Laughs.]

I like to make some miniature garden around my house, but if I go to the stream and seeing wonderful rocks and water running, I give up [laughs, laughter]. "Oh no!" [Laughs, laughter.] "I shall never try to make a rock garden." When my friend who was a gardener—he is very much proud of his art. And when he came to Tassajara, he said: "I shall never [laughs] work on rock garden. It is much better to clean Tassajara stream, picking up paper and cigarettes. That is much better. I shall never work on a rock garden"

We copy nature in the small area. That is maybe Japanese garden, but in nature there is actual beauty which is beyond beauty. Because you see a part of it, you may think this rock should be 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, and if you see a wider area without moving anything, that is complete garden.

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

So to empty—usually when we deny something, at the same time we replace something else. That I deny a blue cup means that I want a white cup. That is [laughs] usually what is happening. When you discuss something, when you argue, that you deny someone's opinion means [laughs] to force your opinion to others. That is usually what we are doing, but our way is not like that. We just correct the added element in your observation of things, and we purify this kind of selfish idea. To see, to accept things as it is is our way. So there is no need to replace something.

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. As one being, it will extend itself. So how to let things extend itself is why we empty things.

This kind of practice is missing in our religious practice. So religion naturally will become like opium sometimes, 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 understand the world of emptiness and to understand why Buddha left so many teachings 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 our idea of self. Our idea of self is involved in our practice. That practice will not work to purify our experience, to purify our life. How we get rid of this kind of tendency is the point we make effort.

When we say "to make our effort" means to push the idea of self to achieve something. That is [laughs] 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.

For instance, if you are reading something, someone may say—your wife or husband [laughs] 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!" When you are 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, 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 may be okay, but if you are making calligraphy [laughs]—calligraphy expresses yourself completely. If your mind is not in a state of emptiness, 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, to make calligraphy is to practice zazen actually [laughs]. Your practice should be there. So when you are working on calligraphy, if someone says, "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 fool yourself [laughs]. That is our practice.

I think you might understand what we are trying here in Zen Center. Sometime it may be all right to practice zazen as a kind of exercise [laughs] or training, 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*, our practice is not that kind of practice. So we put more emphasis on this point. Only when you have this point, various practice will work.

Thank you very much.

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