

ON GENJO-KOAN

Lecture by Shunryu Suzuki Roshi

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Tassajara Zen Mountain Center

There are four ways of understanding the relationship of form and emptiness: form is emptiness, emptiness is form, form is form, and emptiness is emptiness. "Form is emptiness" may not be so difficult to understand, but it will be misunderstood by some advanced, hasty people. "Yes, form is emptiness. There is no need for us to attach to some particular thing. Form is emptiness." This looks very clear, and this view of life is better than attaching to some particular form or color, because in it there are actually many, many views of life. This view of non-existence is deeper than the view of seeing many things which actually look permanent and look like they have self-nature. But as we explained already, there is no special self-nature for anything, and everything is changing. As long as everything is changing, nothing is permanent. So this may be a more advanced view of life.

But "emptiness is form" is rather difficult to understand. The emptiness which is the absolute goal we will attain, which is enlightenment itself, is form. So whatever you do is enlightenment itself. This is rather difficult to understand and to accept, because you think emptiness is some unusual thing. Something unusual is very common. This is difficult to understand, especially when you practice zazen. Even though your practice is not perfect, that is enlightenment. This statement is very difficult to accept. "No, my practice is not perfect." But when we understand form is emptiness, and emptiness is form, back and forth in

this way—and form is form, and emptiness is emptiness—when emptiness comes, everything is emptiness. And when form comes, form is form. We accept things as it is.

So when we come to the understanding of “form is form and emptiness is emptiness,” there is no problem. This is what Dogen-zenji means by “When the moon is in the water, the water will not be broken, nor will the moon be wet.” Moon is moon, and water is water. This is “form is form, emptiness is emptiness.” But here there is the possibility of the misunderstanding that there is no need to practice Zen. “If this is true, why do we practice zazen?” You will have this kind of misunderstanding. But each of the four statements also includes the other three, so there are four ways of understanding each statement. If it is not so, it is not true understanding. So all four statements are actually the same. Whether you say form is form or emptiness is emptiness, or emptiness is form, one statement is enough for you. This is the true understanding of *Prajnaparamita* [Perfection of Wisdom].

Dogen-zenji refers to the koan of Zen Master Hotetsu of Mount Myoho fanning himself. He was a disciple of the famous Hyakujo-zenji and he was a very good Zen master.

“Hotetsu-zenji of Mount Myoho was fanning himself. A monk approached and said, ‘Sir, the nature of wind is permanent, and there is no place it does not reach. Why then must you fan yourself?’” If the nature of wind is everywhere, why do you fan yourself? Do you understand? If everyone has Buddha nature and form is emptiness and emptiness form, then why must you fan yourself?

“‘Although you understand that the nature of wind is permanent, you do not understand the meaning of its reaching everywhere,’ the master replied.” Even though you understand form is emptiness, you do not understand that emptiness is form, in other words.

“‘What is the meaning?’ asked the monk. The master just fanned himself.” He did not answer, just fanned himself. There is a very great difference between a man who fans himself and one who does not fan himself. One will be very hot, one will be very cool, even though wind is everywhere. “The master just fanned himself. The monk bowed with great respect.”

This is an experience of the correct transmission of Buddhism. Dogen-zenji said, “Those who say we should not use a fan because there is wind know neither permanency nor the nature of wind. The nature of wind is permanent. The wind of Buddhism actualizes the gold of the earth and ripens the cheese of the Long River.”

“Ripens the cheese of the Long River”—this is a quotation from the *Gandavyuha Sutra*. The water of the Long River is supposed to be pure milk. But

even though the water of the Long River is pure milk, if it doesn't go through the right process, it cannot become cheese. Milk is milk and cheese is cheese. So if you want to ripen cheese, you should work on it. Even though there is wind, if you do not use your fan, it will not make you cool. Even though there is a lot of gold on the earth, if you do not pick it up, you cannot get gold. This is a very important point.

People may think Zen is a wonderful teaching. "If you study Zen, you will acquire complete freedom. Whatever you do, if you are in a Zen Buddhist robe, it is alright. We have that much freedom in our teaching." This kind of understanding looks like observing the teaching that form is emptiness, but what I mean by "form is emptiness" is quite different. Back and forth we practice, we train our mind and our emotions and our body. And after that process, you will acquire the perfect freedom.

And perfect freedom will only be acquired under some limitation. When you are in one position, realization of the truth will be there. But if you do not work on any position, wandering about from one place to another without knowing where you are, without knowing the place on which you work, there will be no chance to realize your true nature. Even though you use something to make yourself cool—a Japanese round fan, a Chinese fan and a big electric fan—if you are always changing from one to the other, you will spend your time just changing your equipment. And you will have no time to appreciate the cool wind. That is what most people are doing. Reality will be experienced only when you



One of the Tassajara Fall 2005 serving crews: Will Sherwin, Richard Salzberg, Judith Randall, Lucy Xiao, Tim O'Connor Fraser, and Wes Rossacher

are in some particular condition. That is why we say emptiness is form. Emptiness will be very good, but it can only be appreciated in some form or color or under some limitation.

But we cannot be attached to it. You should appreciate, moment after moment, what you are doing right now. First, you must know under which condition you actually are. If you are a teacher, you should behave like a teacher. When you are a student, you should behave like a student. So first of all you should know what your position is, or realization of the truth will not happen to you. This is how we should understand our way. To realize our position and find ourselves is the way.

In this koan, he says, “Even though you know the nature of wind is permanent”—but, strictly speaking, this is rhetoric. Actually, the monk doesn’t know the nature of wind or what is meant by permanence. “Although you understand that the nature of wind is permanent, you do not understand the meaning of its reaching everywhere.” How the wind reaches everywhere, what is everywhere, and what reaching is—he has no idea. He doesn’t know anything. When the nature of the wind is permanent, is when the wind works in some certain direction, in some spirit, under some condition. Then the nature of wind will appear. You see?

“Reaching everywhere” means that the activity of the cool wind, which is blowing in a certain direction, in some spirit, covers everything. At that moment, the movement of the wind is the whole world, and the independent activity of



Suzuki Roshi in 1966.



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In June, Abbot Paul Haller led a ceremony to bless the solar panels installed on the roof of City Center.

the wind. Nothing can be compared with the wind under this condition. Ash is ash, having its own past and future; and firewood is firewood, having its own past and future. Firewood and ash are thoroughly independent. So is the wind. This is how wind reaches everywhere, and this activity is beyond the idea of time.

When we attain enlightenment, all the patriarchs attain enlightenment at the same time. You cannot say Buddha is before and we are after. When you understand enlightenment, you are independent from everything; you have your own past and future, as Buddha has his own past and future. And his position is independent, as your position is independent. If so, this realization is beyond time and space. In this way, the wind reaches everywhere. Do you understand? You cannot say Buddha is before and we are after, like ashes are after and firewood is before. In this way, you should understand that the wind reaches everywhere. In this way, you should realize the nature of wind, which is permanent. The monk did not have any understanding of this kind. For Hotetsu-zenji, it was impossible to explain this direct experience of reality, so he just fanned himself, appreciating the cool wind.

This is a very famous statement: "The wind of Buddhism actualizes the gold of the earth and ripens the cheese of the Long River." Only by your practice, when you practice zazen in this way, aiming at this kind of goal, will you have a chance to attain true enlightenment.

Thank you very much.