Born in 1904, Shunryu Suzuki was a Japanese Zen master who went to San Francisco in 1959 and taught there until his death, of cancer, in 1971. Why leave Japan? 'I had problems there'. Suzuki thought he could do better Zen, and get a better reception for it, outside his homeland than within it. He went even further, saying that, just as Japan in the Fujiwara period worked out its own practice and art after borrowing so much from China, so the West, after looking to the East, would work out its own way.

The Zen Suzuki practised and taught was of the Soto school, a more gradual method than the sudden satori style of Rinzai. It was brought over from China to Japan in the 13th century by Dogen and laid out by him in the Shobogenzo. Dogen Zenji is referred to by Suzuki all the time. 'Not always so' is a phrase of his, meaning not to be caught in preconceived ideas. Shunryu Suzuki understands his lineage, has gone through his classes and knows his classics (he frequently quotes the Shobogenzo, the Blue Cliff Records and many others), he also has very much his own personality and manner. To such an extent that you could, almost, say: 'Not always Soto'. Suzuki offered a first presentation of his own Zen teaching in the classic book Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind. His lectures on the Sandokai were published by the University of California Press in 1999 under the title Branching Streams Flow in the Darkness.

The present book consists of 35 lectures divided into five sections of seven. The division is a bit arbitrary, but it has its attractions. Five, a full hand; seven, for a week's sesshin. One also thinks of the five stages in Soto training: the sense that there's a 'bigger self' than the one we usually live on and work with; the dissolution of the 'small self'; the upsurge of larger life; larger life becoming 'normal'; readiness to cope with anything that comes.

The editing of the lectures was done by one of Suzuki's former pupils, Edward Espe Brown (Jusan Kainei), and he's done a good job, preserving the live style while removing the repetitions that are part-integral of oral delivery. In one instance he's maybe over respectful. Out of what I take rather to be approximate English or a slip of the tongue on Suzuki's part, Brown makes a big esoteric deal, writing 'things as it is' in italics throughout the book, where 'things as they are' (the ta panta of Heraclitus) would in no way detract from Suzuki's meaning.

To get at meaning, you need means. Over the centuries Buddhism has put at the disposal of 'the beginner' a great variety of means. But in the minds of most it will always be 'Buddhism' with which they will be identified. Their minds will be full of Buddha (just as others are full, cloyingly, glutishly, of Christ or God or whatever). This is fullishness. Whereas real meaning, the real intelligence of things, is emptiness. 'In the Age of Emptiness', said Nansen, one of my favourite Zen masters (of the eighth and ninth centuries), 'there were no names. Then the Buddha came into the world and names started up. Since then, we've been stuck on them.' Dogen followed this line. He didn't like to say he was a Soto Zen Buddhist, or an adept of the Soto school, or even a Buddhist. And Shunryu Suzuki always has this perspective in mind: 'Even the name of Buddhism is
already a dirty spot on our practice'. His lectures are, between the lines, and often directly on the line, 'letters from emptiness'.

In these talks Suzuki is teaching American students. They are more earnest than what he would have found generally in modern-day Japan. At the same time, they are maybe over-earnest. They know, vaguely, and Suzuki knows lucidly, that they come from a society marked by glitzy nonentity, screeching inanity, along with mercantile monomania, supermarket mentality, global bossiness and a few other symptoms. They want out of it. What they desire, desperately, while dragging a whole lot of what I've just evoked with them, is a spiritual haven. Suzuki's job, which he does tactfully and humorously, is to nurse them, nudge them from haven-desire and spirituality out into the space-time of emptiness.

To do this he uses every means at his disposal, ringing the changes according to occasion: basic instruction in breathing, body posture and hand gesture, chanting of sutras, rituals, reference to the Buddhist mythic pantheon and its symbols: Manjushri, the Bodhisattva of Wisdom; Avalokitesvara, the Bodhisattva of Compassion, the one with 1000 hands. All this to empty the garbage can of the mind, to depollute the psyche, to get away from the movies of mind-cinema back on to the white screen, to get the person out of a closed, small-minded world into an open world, both generous and far-seeing. This seems highly necessary, given the uncouthness of many of his pupils, who apparently push chairs along the floor of the dining hall rather than lift them, thus they not only disturb the silence of the meditation hall but, more fundamentally, do not respect things.

But Suzuki goes further. As he says now and then (his lectures go on at several levels) a lot of what he's putting across falls within the category of step-ladder strategy. 'To be able to sit in a particular way is not perfect study. After you have full experience of mind and body, you will be able to express it in other ways as well.' The notion that keeps coming up again and again on the horizon is extended practice.

This does not just mean taking over Zen study into everyday life. Nor does it simply mean practising the art of calligraphy or rock-gardening. It means an enlarged sense of life, it means being at home in the universe. How much do we know of the great universe, how much are we in tune with it? How much of our world is more than buzzing busybod ignorance? 'If we do not practise our way with everyone, with all sentient beings, with everything in the world, on the cosmic stage, that is not our way', says Dogen, quoted by Suzuki. He goes on, in his own words: 'Although we practise with people, our goal is to practise with mountains and rivers, with trees and stones, with everything in the world, everything in the universe, and to find ourselves in the big cosmos.' There you have total extended practice.

This is a brief account of a big theme. It is an August afternoon on this coast in the cosmos. There's a magpie outside doing Zen in the old apple tree.