

# The Urban Well

## The Mercy Seminar 2024, Term II.1 Opening Comments

Welcome to Term Two of the 2024 Mercy Seminar! This term we are studying the Zen Buddhist tradition, by means of a close and contemplative reading of six chapters from *The Gateless Barrier: Zen Comments on the Mumonkan*, by the great Zen Master Zenkai Shibayama, or as I knew him, Shibayama Roshi. Shibayama was the Zen Master of Nazenji Monastery in Kyoto, Japan. In the early 1970's, he came to Colgate University at the invitation of Prof. Kenneth Morgan to give his comments, or *teisho*, on various passages from this work. As a consequence, Prof. Morgan invited him to translate the whole of this book, so that American students could study Zen by means of this authoritative Zen training manual, as interpreted by an authentic Zen Master. Shibayama Roshi agreed, and produced this work "for those non-Asians who are interested in studying Zen." Hence the *teisho* he gives are for an American audience, and do not represent the *teisho* he would give to his monks back in Japan. But we can still trust that this work is an authentic expression of Zen, as it comes from a deeply experienced Zen Master.

It is of course deeply ironic to study the Zen Buddhist tradition by studying a Zen text together, even if the text is a manual used to shape the practice of Zen monks and laity. For Zen Buddhists never tire of telling us that the Tao or the Truth cannot be taught, nor can it be expressed in language. We see this several times in the reading for tonight. "Even more foolish is one who clings to words and phrases and thus tries to achieve understanding. It is like trying to strike the moon with a stick, or scratching a shoe because there is an itchy spot on the foot. It has nothing to do with the Truth" (1). "Zen therefore never establishes or provides creeds or dogmas of any sort, any forms at all. No definition, no limitation: that is, no-gate is the only invaluable Dharma Gate to Zen" (2). "As repeatedly stressed, Zen is not something to be philosophically thought about or intellectually understood. It has to be the concrete fact personally attained by one's realization experience. Thus in Zen the religious experience of breaking through the gateless barrier is the absolute requisite for every student. When he has actually broken through the barrier, he can for the first time declare as an actual fact that it is gateless" (6). Thus as we do our reading together this term, we must keep in mind that the text is meant to be read as a guide that is used by a Zen master to lead his student toward the transformational breakthrough of what Zen Buddhists call *satori*, or enlightenment.

The Zen Buddhist tradition was first brought to China in the 500's by Bodhidharma. We do not know much about him, but the form of Buddhist practice that he brought departed from the study of Buddhist scriptures and focused instead on a direct apprehension of the Buddha Nature inherent in all sentient beings. He emphasized the practice of meditation, *dhyana* in Sanskrit, which is translated as *chan* in

Chinese and *zen* in Japanese. It is said that Bodhidharma practiced meditation by staring at a cave wall for nine years. It is also said that he was so frustrated by falling asleep while meditating that he cut off his eyelids, which is why he is often portrayed with bulging eyeballs. Once the Buddhist tradition came to China, it was interpreted in light of the Taoist philosophical tradition, which is why I included two readings from *The Book of Chuang Tzu* in tonight's reading. We can see echoes in Zen of the Taoist insistence that the eternal Tao cannot be named. "Those who know do not speak; those who speak do not know. Therefore the sage practices the teaching that has no words" (6).

Bodhidharma is considered to be the first Chinese patriarch in the Chan/Zen tradition. However, Zen Buddhists track their lineage all the way back to India at the time of the Buddha, around 500 BCE in northern India. In one of the texts near and dear to Zen Buddhists, the Flower Sermon, we hear the Zen version of the original transmission of the Buddha's teaching to his foremost follower Mahakasyapa, who is the first patriarch of the Zen tradition:

The king of Brahma, whose name is Fang Guang, offered a bright and wonderful lotus flower to the Buddha. After he did that, the king of Brahma backed off and bowed to the Buddha, and said, "World Honored One, since you got enlightened 50 years ago, you have been transforming all the living beings with all kinds of teachings and skills. If there is still supreme Buddha Dharma unrevealed, please expound for me and all those who will practice the Bodhisattava Path and the Buddha Path in the future."

At this moment, the Buddha walked up to sit on the Dharma seat. He gently held the flower with fingers without speaking any words. There were 84,000 heavenly beings and humans in the assembly. At this time, they all stopped what they were doing and remained silent. When the elder Maha Kasyapa saw the Buddha picking up the flower with fingers and showing the great Dharma to all the heavenly beings and humans around, he silently broke into a smile.

The Buddha then said, "I possess the true Dharma eye, the marvelous heart of Nirvāṇa, the true form of the formless, the subtle Dharma gate that does not rest on words or letters but is a special transmission outside of the scriptures. This I entrust to Maha Kasyapa." With that said, the Buddha went back to silence.

The Zen Buddhist tradition claims to arise from this special transmission outside the scriptures, starting with the wordless transmission from the Buddha to Maha Kasyapa. Zen is transmitted mind to mind, not by means of language or teaching; and just as the Buddha validated the enlightenment of Maha Kasyapa, so also each Zen practitioner has their *satori* verified by the Zen Master under whom they train. We see this dynamic in the experience of the Sixth Patriarch in China, the lay person Huineng, as attested in the Platform Sutra. Huineng tells us:

At midnight the Fifth Patriarch called me into the hall and expounded the Diamond Sūtra to me. Hearing it once, I was immediately awakened, and that night I received the Dharma. None of the others knew anything about it. Then he transmitted to me the Dharma of Sudden Enlightenment and the robe, saying: “I make you the Sixth Patriarch. The robe is the proof and is to be handed down from generation to generation. My Dharma must be transmitted from mind to mind. You must make people awaken to themselves.”

Although Zen Buddhists do not center their practice on the study of Buddhist teachings or sutras, but rather transmit Dharma from mind to mind, there are several sutras that are important to Zen practice, especially the Diamond Sutra that was expounded to Huineng, which led to his own sudden enlightenment. As he himself says, “Should a person of the Mahayana hear the Diamond Sūtra, his mind will open and he will gain awakening.” The Diamond Sutra is often chanted by Zen monks in their practice. This sutra is part of the Perfection of Wisdom literature, like the Heart Sutra, and both sutras focus on the emptiness of all reality, to free our minds from any kind of grasping or clinging, and thus to free us from all suffering. Bodhisattvas are those who have awakened to the emptiness of all reality, so that they might free all sentient beings from suffering. Here are a few representative passages from the Diamond Sutra to give you a sense of the wisdom that Zen monks hear as they chant this sutra:

At that time, the Venerable Subhuti stood up, bared his right shoulder, put his knee on the ground, and, folding his palms respectfully, said to the Buddha, “World-Honored One, if sons and daughters of good families want to give rise to the highest, most fulfilled, awakened mind, what should they rely on and what should they do to master their thinking?”

The Buddha said to Subhuti, “This is how the Bodhisattva Mahasattvas master their thinking: ‘However many species of living beings there are—whether born from eggs, from the womb, from moisture, or spontaneously; whether they have form or do not have form; whether they have perceptions or do not have perceptions; or whether it cannot be said of them that they have perceptions or that they do not have perceptions, we must lead all these beings to nirvana so that they can be liberated. Yet when this innumerable, immeasurable, infinite number of beings has become liberated, we do not, in truth, think that a single being has been liberated.’

“Subhuti, do not say that the Tathagata has the idea, ‘I will bring living beings to the shore of liberation.’ Do not think that way, Subhuti. Why? In truth there is not one single being for the Tathagata to bring to the other shore. If the Tathagata were to think there was, he would be caught in the idea of a self, a person, a living being, or a life span. Subhuti, what the Tathagata calls a self essentially has no self in the way that ordinary persons think there is a self. Subhuti, the Tathagata does not regard anyone as an ordinary person. That is why he can call them ordinary persons.”

The source of suffering is clinging, and the source of clinging is the idea of the self, the person, the living being, the life span. The Bodhisattva can only free suffering creatures if the Bodhisattva is free of all ideas that there are living creatures. We see the same emphasis on emptiness in the Heart Sutra, which is also very important to Zen Buddhists:

Avalokiteshvara  
while practicing deeply with  
the Insight that Brings Us to the Other Shore,  
suddenly discovered that  
all of the five Skandhas are equally empty,  
and with this realisation  
he overcame all Ill-being/suffering.

“Listen Sariputra,  
this Body itself is Emptiness  
and Emptiness itself is this Body.  
This Body is not other than Emptiness  
and Emptiness is not other than this Body.  
The same is true of Feelings,  
Perceptions, Mental Formations,  
and Consciousness.

“Listen Sariputra,  
all phenomena bear the mark of Emptiness;  
their true nature is the nature of  
no Birth no Death,  
no Being no Non-being,  
no Defilement no Purity,  
no Increasing no Decreasing.

“That is why in Emptiness,  
Body, Feelings, Perceptions,  
Mental Formations and Consciousness  
are not separate self entities.”

We see this insight echoed in tonight’s reading, when Shibayama Roshi describes the highest reality in terms of “it.” “‘It,’ which is essentially in oneself, is eternally unchanging. This non-coming, non-going ‘it’ does definitely pass through no-gate, and freely works everywhere with no-form” (3).

The Zen Buddhist tradition in Japan has two main branches, Soto Zen and Rinzai Zen. We are studying a text from the Rinzai Zen tradition, which focuses on the use of the *koan* to break down our dualistic consciousness so that we can break through the gateless barrier and attain *satori*. The readings for the next five weeks will focus on five *koan*, with Mumon's commentary and Shibayama's *teisho*. Rinzai Zen's use of the *koan* as the means for sudden enlightenment or *satori* can be seen in Mumon's own experience:

Master Mumon was first ordained as a Buddhist monk under Master Tenryu Ko and later moved to Master Getsurin Shikan. He studied very hard with the koan "Has a Dog the Buddha Nature?" under Master Getsurin for six long years, going through most assiduous training, and one day when he heard the drumbeat he was suddenly enlightened. The poem he made on that occasion is:

A thunderclap under a clear blue sky!  
All beings on earth have opened their eyes.  
Everything under the sun has bowed at once.  
Mount Sumeru jumps up and dances.

The next day Mumon presented his attainment to Master Getsurin, who verified his *satori*. Finally he succeeded the Master.

Mumon's story brings us to the heart of Rinzai Zen practice. Mumon studied under a master, who gave him a *koan* to work on, either in his studies or in his *zazen* or meditation. After six years of working on this *koan* under the direction of his master, Mumon heard the drumbeat and was immediately enlightened. And his enlightenment was verified by his master, whom he eventually succeeded. This is the transmission of the Dharma outside the scriptures, that does not rely on words or letters. This is the Dharma that is transmitted mind to mind, the Dharma of Sudden Enlightenment. This is the experience towards which all that we will be reading from *The Gateless Barrier* is directed. To quote Shibayama Roshi once again, "As repeatedly stressed, Zen is not something to be philosophically thought about or intellectually understood. It has to be the concrete fact personally attained by one's realization experience. Thus in Zen the religious experience of breaking through the gateless barrier is the absolute requisite for every student" (6).