

The Urban Well

The Mercy Seminar 2024, Term II.1

Shibayama Roshi, *Zen Comments on the Mumonkan* Master Mumon's Preface Zen-shu Mumonkan "The Gateless Barrier of Zen"

MUMON'S PREFACE

The Buddha Mind is the basis, and gateless is the Dharma Gate. If it is gateless, how can you pass through it? Have you not heard that "nothing that enters by the gate can be a family treasure—whatever is causally gained is always subject to change"? These talks would serve to stir up waves where there is no wind, or to gash a wound in a healthy skin. 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.

In the summer of the first year of Jotei [1228], I, Ekai, was the head of the monks at Ryusho in Toka. The monks begged me for instruction. Finally I took up the koan of ancient Masters and used them as brickbats to knock at the gate in guiding the monks in accordance with their capabilities and types. I have noted down these koan and they have now unwittingly become quite a collection. There are now forty-eight of them, which I have not arranged in any order. I will call the collection the Mumonkan, "The Gateless Barrier."

If a fellow is brave, he will plunge straight in with no regard to any danger. The eight-armed Nata may try to stop him, but in vain. Even the twenty-eight Patriarchs of India and the six Patriarchs of China would cower at his bravery and have to beg for their lives. If he hesitates, however, he will be like a man watching a horse gallop past the window. In the twinkling of an eye it is already gone.

MUMON'S POEM

Gateless is the Great Tao,
There are thousands of ways to it.
If you pass through this barrier,
You may walk freely in the universe.

TEISHO ON MUMON'S PREFACE

The compiler of the *Mumonkan*, Master Mumon, was born in 1183 in the southern Sung dynasty, at Sento of Koshu, and died on April 7, 1260, in his seventy-eighth year. He was born when the hour of the doom of the southern Sung dynasty was at hand because of the increasing pressures of neighboring nations.

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. It was in Mumon’s forty-sixth year that he published the *Mumonkan*, a collection of forty-eight koan with his commentaries which he had given at Ryushoji in Toka.

By imperial order, Master Mumon founded Gokoku Ninnoji when he was in his sixty-fourth year. Later he wanted to lead a quiet retired life by Lake Seiko, but was not able to do so because there were always truth-seekers calling on him one after another.

Mumon is described in this poem:

The Master looked thin and holy,
 His words were simple but profound.
 Long and dark his hair and beard;
 He was clothed in tattered rags.

He was nicknamed Lay Monk Ekai.

Master Mumon wrote a preface to this collection, and a commentary on each koan. His writing is in the direct and exclamatory Zen style popular among Zen Masters in those days; he never tried to explain or preach.

From of old it has been a point at issue whether the first phrase, “*Zen-shu Mumonkan*,” is the title of the book or the first sentence, meaning “There is no gate in Zen.” I have followed the traditional, generally accepted interpretation here that it is the title.

At the very beginning of the Preface Master Mumon clarifies the basic characteristics of Zen and his attitude toward expression in words and letters. “The Buddha Mind is the basis, and gateless is the Dharma Gate”—these words, first used by Master Baso in his teisho to his disciples, were quoted originally from *Ryoga-kyo* (the *Lankavatara Sutra*). With these first two lines Master Mumon concisely

defines Zen. He may have used the term “*Mumon*” (“gateless” or “no-gate”) with reference to the title of his own book, too.

“Zen is based on the mind or the spirit of Buddha’s sayings. In other words, the formless Reality, which is called the Buddha Mind, True Mind, Original Nature, etc., is its basis. 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.” Thus at the beginning Master Mumon clarifies the primary standpoint of Zen. He then goes on to give teisho-commentary on “*Mumon*” (no-gate), which he has just emphasized as the foundation of Zen. “Since there is no gate from the beginning, there can be no question of passing or not passing through it. Now, how do you pass through this no-gate? Those who can really pass through it, do so and show it to me,” Mumon challenges. Here is, however, an important experiential question to be answered in actual training by each individual, that is, whether to regard Mumon as no-gate and not to concern oneself about it, or to take no-gate as a barrier and break through it. Each student has to take it up as a concrete question of his self-realization.

Mumon then quotes an old saw to show what the real no-gate is: “Nothing that enters by the gate can be a family treasure. Whatever is causally gained is always subject to change.” The real, invaluable treasure is that which has always been kept in the family and not something that has been brought in from outside. Anything gained by chance will finally be lost by change. “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. “Nothing that enters by the gate can be a family treasure” is an old popular saying in China which means “Nothing given by others can be really good.” Anything received from others will not have sufficient value to deserve being treasured as an heirloom. What is basically in oneself is the real treasure with eternal value.

This saying may have reference to the following *mondo* between Master Ganto and his disciple Seppo. Once long ago, when Master Seppo was studying under Master Ganto, the latter rebuked him for searching outwardly, outside himself, and said, “Have you not heard that ‘nothing that enters by the gate can be a family treasure’?” Seppo asked in return, “How should I carry on with my training then?” Ganto replied, “If you want to get and spread the Great Truth, grasp ‘it’ that flows out of your own mind, and present it here for me!”

Do not seek outwardly, but get hold of “it,” which gushes out of your own mind. If you foolishly look after others’ treasures saying that it is so written in this holy book, or it is thus explained by that wise man, you can never pass through this gate of no-gate. Mumon thus warns us.

He goes on to say, “These talks would serve to stir up waves where there is no wind, or to gash a wound in a healthy skin.” “These talks” refers to the forty-eight koan compiled in this book and the commentaries on them. From the primary standpoint of Zen the forty-eight talks are all unnecessary waste. To give them is just like raising waves on a windless quiet sea, or performing an operation on a beautiful natural skin and leaving an ugly scar. It is unnecessary meddling. And being unnecessary it does much harm. Mumon thus denounces the whole book as a meaningless effort.

“To gash a wound in a healthy skin” means, metaphorically, to do something unnecessary and useless. The expression may have been taken from Master Unmon’s saying, “Even if you were capable

of clarifying the whole universe by twisting a single hair, it would be as meaningless as gashing a wound in the skin.”

Mumon further disparages the foolishness of the person who “clings to words and phrases and thus tries to achieve understanding.”

To introduce a lot of talk is already uncalled-for meddling. The foolishness of the person who clings to words and phrases, interprets them intellectually, and thus tries to understand is preposterous and beyond description. Such people may be compared to the man who tries to strike the moon with a stick and scratches his shoe because he has an itchy spot on his foot. “It has nothing to do with the Truth.” Mumon emphatically speaks of the foolishness of such a letter-bound student.

From the fundamental standpoint of Zen, which declares no-gate to be its Dharma Gate, it is meaningless and useless to introduce these forty-eight koan and give teisho on them. It is as foolish as trying to strike the moon or as scratching a shoe when one has an itchy foot. Such meddling has nothing to do with the gate of no-gate. Mumon harshly criticizes his own book as an altogether unnecessary effort. What is Mumon’s real intention in ending the first part of his own preface with these strong words? Using such abusive language, based on the fundamental standpoint of Zen, Mumon wants us to open our eyes to the Truth of Zen, the Absolute. In other words, he urges us to pass firmly and directly through no-gate.

In the second part, changing his tone, Mumon explains how this book was made. “In the summer of the first year of Jotei [1228], I, Ekai, was the head of the monks at Ryusho in Toka. The monks begged me for instruction. Finally I took up the koan of ancient Masters and used them as brickbats to knock at the gate in guiding the monks in accordance with their capabilities and types.”

Mumon says, “When I was the head monk at the Ryushoji Monastery of Mount Koshin in the summer of 1228, the monks begged me to give them some instruction that might be useful for them in their training. Being unable to turn down their earnest request, I finally told them old Zen Masters’ *mondo* and sayings which have been studied as koan, as a means of instructing the monks in accordance with their abilities and inclinations. From the fundamental standpoint of Zen ‘it’ can never be taught or shown by others, yet I hoped these koan might serve as brickbats to knock at the door, or as a finger pointing to the moon until no-gate might be opened. The notes and records of these koan and commentaries have in the course of time become considerable and I now have forty-eight koan. I have not arranged them in any order, but gave them one at a time. I have now compiled this collection, and will name it *Mumonkan*.”

In the first year of Jotei (1228) Master Mumon was forty-six years old. The power of the southern Sung dynasty had begun to wane. Toward the end of the dynasty the nation was in a state of confusion. Zen, too, was gradually declining, without the lively spirit it used to have in its heyday. A book like the *Mumonkan*, to be used as a good manual for monks in training, was much needed then. It was at such a time that Master Mumon appeared in the world and met the current needs of the students of Zen. In short, the *Mumonkan* may be characterized as a standard Zen text designed to point out the direction for students in their training.

In concluding his own preface, Master Mumon raises his voice and addresses his disciples: “A truly brave man will plunge straight into the Reality of no-gate, staking his own life. He will never

hesitate, no matter what danger may be involved. Then even a demon with supernatural power like Nata will be unable to interfere with the training of such a brave truth-seeker. Before such a courageous monk, even the twenty-eight Patriarchs of India and the succeeding six Chinese Patriarchs will cower in wonder at his sincere searching and will have to beg for their lives.” With much emphasis Mumon encourages the students to give their hearts and souls to their discipline.

He goes on to say, “If, on the contrary, you hesitate to stake your life on your training, you will miss it in an instant, just as if you were to catch a glimpse of a horse galloping past the window. You will immediately lose sight of the Zen mind and will never be able even to approach the gate of no-gate.” Mumon ends his preface with these stimulating words with which he tells us how difficult it is to attain Zen Truth, as well as stirring up in us a strong will and intrepid spirit.

TEISHO ON MUMON’S POEM

Gateless is the Great Tao,
There are thousands of ways to it.
If you pass through this barrier,
You may walk freely in the universe.

“The Great Tao” is the “Ultimate Way,” “Supreme Truth,” and the essence of Zen. It may be called by various names, but the fundamental Truth is One and ever unchanging. Therefore the Great Tao has no gate. Because it is gateless, it is now in front of you and suddenly you see it behind you. It pervades the universe.

The Japanese word for Tao is “*michi*,” which means “abounding.” It is abundant everywhere.

Long ago in China a monk asked Master Gensha, “I am a novice just arrived at this monastery. From where can I enter into Zen?” Gensha said, “Can you hear the murmuring of the mountain stream?” “Yes, I can,” replied the monk. “Enter Zen from there,” was Master Gensha’s answer.

Enter from anywhere freely. It is all open in every direction and is gateless. Rather, I should say, because it is gateless it is the Great Tao. There is no argument about passing through or not passing through. It is therefore said, “There are thousands of ways to it.” The fact that it is gateless means that everything as it is is “it.” Also it means there are infinitely different ways to it. An old Zen Master said, “Look under your feet!” If you stand, the very place where you stand is Tao. If you sit down, the very place you sit on is Tao. In fact, to say the Great Tao is gateless is only a partial truth. To say there are thousands of ways to it is also a half-truth. Apart from the principle of fundamental equality, there can never be phenomena of differentiation. Apart from the phenomena of differentiation, there can never be the principle of fundamental equality. Equality is at once differentiation; differentiation is at once equality—this is how the Great Tao is. This is the Reality of no-gate, which transcends both yes and no, affirmation and negation.

An old proverb says, “Fish do not know of water while they are in water.” However true it may be that everyone lives in the Great Tao, if he does not realize the fact then we have to say that there

definitely is the gate of no-gate for him. Zen Masters then have to insist on his breaking through the gateless barrier. From this secondary point of view Master Mumon declares,

If you pass through this barrier,
You may walk freely in the universe.

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. He is then wholly free, and there will be nothing in the universe that interferes with his creative working. Until one has this experience, his no-gate remains an idea and a concept.

Master Rinzai says, in describing this absolute freedom of striding through the universe, "Once you are the Absolute Master [subjectively], wherever you may be, everything is true for you. Circumstances may change but they cannot affect you."

This is the new vista of Zen that will be opened to you when you have actually broken through the Great Tao that has no gate. This is the Zen life which you will freely develop. Master Mumon presents the true picture of the Great Tao in a poem, and asks for the renewed determination of his monks to carry on with their training.

The Book of Chuang Tzu

xx.1

KNOWLEDGE WANDERED NORTH to the banks of the Black Waters, climbed the Knoll of Hidden Heights, and there by chance came upon Do-Nothing-Say-Nothing. Knowledge said to Do-Nothing-Say-Nothing, "There are some things I'd like to ask you. What sort of pondering, what sort of cogitation does it take to know the Way [Tao]? What sort of surroundings, what sort of practices does it take to find rest in the Way? What sort of path, what sort of procedure will get me to the Way [Tao]?"

Three questions he asked, but Do-Nothing-Say-Nothing didn't answer. It wasn't that he just didn't answer—he didn't know how to answer!

Knowledge, failing to get any answer, returned to the White Waters of the south, climbed the summit of Dubiety Dismissed, and there caught sight of Wild-and-Witless. Knowledge put the same questions to Wild-and-Witless. "Ah—I know!" said Wild-and-Witless. "And I'm going to tell you." But just as he was about to say something, he forgot what it was he was about to say.

Knowledge, failing to get any answer, returned to the imperial palace, where he was received in audience by the Yellow Emperor, and posed his questions. The Yellow Emperor said, "Only when there is no pondering and no cogitation will you get to know the Way. Only when you have no surroundings and follow no practices will you find rest in the Way. Only when there is no path and no procedure can you get to know the Way." Knowledge said to the Yellow Emperor, "You and I know, but those other two that I asked didn't know. Which of us is right, I wonder?"

The Yellow Emperor said, "Do-Nothing-Say-Nothing—he's the one who is truly right. Wild-and-Witless appears to be so. But you and I in the end are nowhere near it. 'Those who know do not speak; those who speak do not know. Therefore the sage practices the teaching that has no words.'"

xxiii.6

Master Tung-kuo asked Chuang Tzu, “This thing called the Way [Tao]—where does it exist?”

Chuang Tzu said, “There’s no place it doesn’t exist.”

“Come,” said Master Tung-kuo, “you must be more specific!”

“It is in the ant.”

“As low a thing as that?”

“It is in the panic grass.”

“But that’s lower still!”

“It is in the tiles and shards.”

“How can it be so low?”

“It is in the piss and shit!”

Master Tung-kuo made no reply.

Chuang Tzu said, “Sir, your questions simply don’t get at the substance of the matter. When Inspector Huo asked the superintendent of the market how to test the fatness of a pig by pressing it with the foot, he was told that the lower down on the pig you press, the nearer you come to the truth. But you must not expect to find the Way in any particular place—there is no thing that escapes its presence! Such is the Perfect Way, and so too are the truly great words. ‘Complete,’ ‘universal,’ ‘all-inclusive’—these three are different words with the same meaning. All point to a single reality.

“Why don’t you try wandering with me to the Palace of Not-Even-Anything—identity and concord will be the basis of our discussions and they will never come to an end, never reach exhaustion. Why not join with me in inaction, in tranquil quietude, in hushed purity, in harmony and leisure? Already my will is vacant and blank. I go nowhere and don’t know how far I’ve gotten. I go and come and don’t know where to stop. I’ve already been there and back, and I don’t know when the journey is done. I ramble and relax in unbordered vastness; Great Knowledge enters in, and I don’t know where it will ever end. “That which treats things as things is not limited by things. Things have their limits—the so-called limits of things. The unlimited moves to the realm of limits; the limited moves to the unlimited realm. We speak of the filling and emptying, the withering and decay of things. [The Way] makes them full and empty without itself filling or emptying; it makes them wither and decay without itself withering or decaying. It establishes root and branch but knows no root and branch itself; it determines when to store up or scatter but knows no storing or scattering itself.”

Lankavatara Sutra II: Disciples should be on their guard against the seduction of words and sentences and their illusive meanings, for by them the ignorant and dull-witted become entangled and helpless as an elephant floundering about in the deep mud. Words and sentences are produced by the law of causation and are mutually conditioning—they cannot express the highest Reality. Moreover, in the highest Reality there are no differentiations to be discriminated and there is nothing to be predicated in regards to it. Highest Reality is an exalted state of bliss, it is not a state of word-discrimination, and it cannot be entered into by mere statements concerning it. The Thatagatas have a better way of teaching, namely, through self-realization of Noble Wisdom.