

The Urban Well

The Mercy Seminar 2024, Term II.2

Opening Comments

Last week we saw the way Zen Buddhists warn us away from reliance on using language to attain understanding. We see this in the Flower Sermon, when the Buddha teaches the hidden Dharma by simply holding a lotus flower in his fingers, and Mahakasyapa smiles. We see this in the way Zen describes itself as a direct transmission, mind to mind, apart from the scriptures. As Shibayama Roshi tells us in the reading for last week:

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 (3).

Accordingly, Zen masters reject the attempt to seek to understand Zen by means of words and understanding. As Shibayama Roshi says,

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” (4).

However, there is another side to the relationship of Zen to language, which we saw last week when Mumon described why he decided to compile and comment on forty-eight koan that are used in training the students of Zen. “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” (1). As Shibayama Roshi says,

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 (4).

So in spite of insisting on a direct transmission outside of scripture, and in spite of denigrating any attempt to understand Zen by means of concepts and language, Rinzai Zen Buddhists use language in their own particular way to guide the student toward the realization of satori, or enlightenment. And the koan, along with its explication, becomes the primary way language is used in the training of Zen students, under the direction of a Zen Master. It is essential to remember that Zen training takes place in a one-on-one relationship of Master to student or disciple, as we see in tonight's reading, when Master Nansen asks Joshu, "Do you already have a master to study under, or not?" (2). So when we are reading *The Gateless Barrier*, it is helpful to imagine that Shibayama Roshi is speaking to each of us individually, and not to all of us collectively. I know that in the United States, this is exactly how this book is being used in various Zendos, or places for Zen meditation, including one in our own area.

This week we begin our exploration of the use of the koan in the training of Zen students. The first thing we encounter is both the goal of such training, and the means to attain that goal. As Mumon tells us, in his first comment after narrating the koan of Joshu's "Mu!", "In studying Zen, one must pass the barriers set up by ancient Zen Masters. For the attainment of incomparable satori, one has to cast away his discriminating mind. Those who have not passed the barrier and have not cast away the discriminating mind are all phantoms haunting trees and plants" (1). We therefore learn that the gateless barrier is created by the Zen master, assigning a koan to his student; and when one breaks through the gateless barrier, one attains satori.

The koan is given to the student so that he might cast away the illusory discriminating knowledge and consciousness accumulated up till now (1). As Shibayama Roshi says, "A koan in Zen is fundamentally different from questions and problems in general. Etymologically the term koan means 'the place where the truth is.' In actual training its role is to smash up our dualistic consciousness and open our inner spiritual eye to a new vista" (4). The koan is not a problem posed for us to solve, or a riddle posed to us for which we are to find the right answer. We can see how tempting it would be to misunderstand the use of koan in this way by the two stories that Shibayama Roshi tells about previous Zen masters, including himself.

My teacher also asked me once, "Show me the form of 'Mu'!" When I said, "It has no form whatsoever," he pressed me, saying "I want to see that form which has no-form." How cutting and drastic! Unless one can freely and clearly present the form of "Mu," it turns out to be a meaningless corpse.

In the biography of Master Hakuin we read the following moving story of his first encounter with his teacher, Master Shoji. Shoji asked Hakuin, “Tell me, what is Joshu’s ‘Mu’?” Hakuin elatedly replied, “Pervading the universe! Not a spot whatsoever to take hold of it” As soon as he had given that answer, Shoji took hold of Hakuin’s nose and gave it a twist. “I am quite at ease to take hold of it,” said Shoji, laughing aloud. The next moment he released it and abused Hakuin, “You! Dead monk in a cave! Are you self-satisfied with such ‘Mu’?” This completely put Hakuin out of countenance (3).

The Master is not looking for a clever Zen answer when giving the student the koan, even an answer that is on the surface quite true and penetrating, like saying Mu has no form whatsoever, or saying that Mu pervades the universe with not a spot to take hold of it. Such answers reveal that the koan has not done its work, for such answers betray the discriminating mind that the koan seeks to smash. As Shibayama Roshi says,

Training in Zen aims at the direct experience of breaking through to concrete Reality. That breaking through to Reality has to be personally attained by oneself. Zen can never be an idea or knowledge, which are only shadows of Reality. You may reason out that “Mu” transcends both yes and no, that it is the Absolute Oneness where all dualistic discrimination is exhausted. While you are thus conceptualizing, real “Mu” is lost forever (3).

What then is the discriminating mind that the koan seeks to lead us to cast away? Our reading has a very good description of this kind of mind, in distinction from the Buddha Nature that all sentient creatures have, including the dog!

All sentient beings without exception have the Buddha Nature. This is the fundamental Truth of non-dualism and equality. On the other hand, this actual world of ours is dualistic and full of discriminations. The above mondo [of Joshu’s “Mu!”] presents to us the basic contradiction between the fundamental Truth of non-dualism and actual phenomena. The ancient Masters made us face the fact that we human beings from the very beginning have been living in this fundamental contradiction (5).

The discriminating and dualistic mind is the mind that all of us use to navigate our lives in the world. “‘Discriminating mind’ is our ordinary consciousness, which is dualistic, discriminating, and the cause of all sorts of illusions” (6). This mind leads me to distinguish myself from all others in the world, human life from all other forms of life, good from evil, yes from no, darkness from light. Such a mind leads me to seek to be on the side of light instead of darkness, yes instead of no, life instead of death, love instead of hatred, my loved ones instead of my enemies, human beings instead of other creatures. It can also lead me to seek to cling to the Creator instead of any creature. All such forms of thinking are discriminating and dualistic, and the use of the koan by the student under the direction of the master is meant to lead the student to cast such dualistic and discriminating knowledge away.

Mumon's instructions continue: never be negligent, even for a short while, but do zazen and devote yourself to the koan day and night. An old Master described this training process, saying, "Work like a mother hen trying to hatch her eggs." Do not misunderstand "Mu" as nihilistic emptiness. Never in the world take it as a dualistic No in opposition to Yes. Needless to say, it has nothing to do with intellectual discrimination or dualistic reasoning. It is utterly beyond all description (7).

The various koan that Zen masters use are meant to utterly frustrate any attempt to resolve them by discursive reasoning or dualistic thinking. The goal of this training is to plunge the student into the abyss of Great Doubt. Great Doubt is greater than Cartesian doubt, in which Descartes doubted everything, for this was still dualistic, discursive reasoning. Rather, Great Doubt might best be described as an existential crisis, in which the entire personality of the student is brought to the limits of dualistic and discursive reasoning. Mumon describes this crisis by means of the metaphor of swallowing a red-hot iron ball. As Shibayama Roshi says,

"Like having bolted a red-hot iron ball" describes the one who, with his whole being, body and soul, has plunged into the Great Doubt, the spiritual quest. All the emotions are exhausted, all the intellect has come to its extremity; there is not an inch for the discrimination to enter. This is the state of utmost spiritual intensification. When it is hot, the whole universe is nothing but the heat; when you see, it is just one pure act of seeing—there is no room there for any thought to come in. In such a state, Mumon warns us, never give up but straightforwardly carry on with your striving. In such a state no thought of discrimination can be present (7-8).

One should keep striving even in the midst of the existential extremity of Great Doubt, for on the other side of this barrier is the new life of satori. According to Shibayama Roshi, "Zen calls this experience 'incomparable satori,' or 'to die a Great Death once and to revive from death.' Mumon described his experience of attaining satori by saying that 'all beings on earth have opened their eyes.' This is the most important and essential process one has to go through in Zen training" (8). Thus we are encouraged to keep striving, even when it seems like all such striving is futile, because on the other side of the abyss of Great Doubt is the non-dualistic realization of satori.

The experience of the Buddha Nature itself is creatively expressed here by "Mu." Although literally "Mu" means No, in this case it points to the incomparable satori which transcends both yes and no, to the religious experience of the Truth one can attain when he casts away his discriminating mind. It has nothing to do with the dualistic interpretation of yes and no, being and nonbeing. It is Truth itself, the Absolute itself (3).

Here we also see another positive use of language in Zen training, for the Zen Master will use whatever language he can to portray satori to us so that we devote all of our energy to attain it, whatever it might take, even though the experience of satori transcends all language.

As Master Daiye says, “Satori is the fundamental experience in Zen.” One has to cast his ordinary self away and be reborn as a new Self in a different dimension. In other words, the student must personally have the inner experience called satori, by which he is reborn as the True Self. This fundamental experience of awakening is essential in Zen. Although various different expressions are used when talking about the fact of this religious awakening, it cannot be real Zen without it.

The phrases that Shibayama Roshi uses to describe satori focus on absolute freedom and absolute peace. Absolute freedom is captured by the shocking saying that we kill the Buddha when we meet him.

Zen postulates absolute freedom in which all attachments and restraints are completely wiped away. The Buddha therefore is to be cast away and so are the Patriarchs. Any restraints whatsoever in the mind are to be cast away. For the one who has passed through the abyss of Great Doubt, transcending subject and object, you and I, and has been revived as the True Self, can there be anything to disturb him? (7-8).

Such freedom from all attachments and restraints is combined with eternal peace. “Mumon tells us how wonderful it is to experience breaking through the barrier and to live the life of satori. Once the Gate is broken through, ultimate peace is attained. . . . There can be no greater joy. To experience this is to attain eternal peace” (7). And as we heard in the *Lectio Divina* for tonight, the attainment of satori is like dying to our false self and being revived as our true self, which is no-self:

This is the moment when the I and the world are both altogether gone. This is exactly the moment when one’s discriminating mind is emptied and cast away. When one is in the abyss of absolute “Mu” in actual training, the inexpressible moment comes upon him—the moment when “Mu” is awakened to “Mu,” that is, when he is revived as the self of no-self. At this mysterious moment, he is like a dumb person who has had a wonderful dream, for he is fully aware of it, but is unable to use words to express it. The Absolute Nothingness (“Mu”) is awakened to itself. This is the moment of realization when subject-object opposition is altogether transcended. To describe it we have to use such words as inexpressible or mysterious (8).

What a marvelous description! Satori is “the moment when ‘Mu’ is awakened to ‘Mu,’” when “the Absolute Nothingness is awakened to itself.” Satori truly is inexpressible and mysterious, even though Zen masters cannot help using language to describe it.