

The Urban Well

The Mercy Seminar 2024, Term II.4

Sakyamuni Holds Up a Flower

KOAN

Long ago when the World-Honored One was at Mount Grdhrakuta to give a talk, he held up a flower before the assemblage. At this all remained silent. The Venerable Kasho alone broke into a smile. The World-Honored One said, “I have the all-pervading True Dharma, incomparable Nirvana, exquisite teaching of formless form. It does not rely on letters and is transmitted outside scriptures. I now hand it to Maha Kasho.”

MUMON’S COMMENTARY

Yellow-faced Gotama is certainly outrageous. He turns the noble into the lowly, sells dog-flesh advertised as sheep’s head. I thought there was something interesting in it. However, at that time if everyone in the assemblage had smiled, to whom would the True Dharma have been handed? Or again, if Kasho had not smiled, would the True Dharma have been transmitted? If you say that the True Dharma can be transmitted, the yellow-faced old man with his loud voice deceived simple villagers. If you say that it cannot be transmitted, then why was Kasho alone approved?

MUMON’S POEM

A flower is held up,
And the secret has been revealed.
Kasho breaks into a smile;
The whole assemblage is at a loss.

TEISHO ON THE KOAN

“The World-Honored One” is a name given to Sakyamuni Buddha. He is said to have been born in the kingdom of Magadha as Prince Siddhartha of the Sakya tribe in 565 B.C., to have renounced the world at the age of twenty-nine, attained Buddhahood at thirty-five, and entered Nirvana in 486 B.C. at the age of eighty after spending his life teaching Buddhism as its founder.

Mount Grdhrakuta is a mountain near the capital of Magadha where Sakyamuni used to give his talks. Because its shape looks like the head of an eagle, it is also called Mount Eagle.

Maha Kasho (Kashyapa in Sanskrit) was one of Sakyamuni’s Ten Great Disciples. He was respected for his most assiduous discipline and after Sakyamuni’s death was active as the leader of the Buddhist community, the Sangha. He is respected as the Buddha’s successor. He died around 436 B.C.

Zen maintains that it directly transmits Sakyamuni Buddha’s religious experience itself, and that the life of Zen lies in the fact of this transmission. How then does the Dharma transmission actually take

place in Zen? This koan of “Sakyamuni Holds Up a Flower” is a very significant one as it gives us a clear and concrete example of the unique Dharma transmission in Zen. Before giving my teisho on the koan, it may be helpful to give a brief explanation of its background.

There are a number of books in China with stories more or less similar to the one in this koan. They all record this account of “Sakyamuni Holds Up a Flower” as if it were a historically traceable event. The source of the incident is *Daibontenno Monbutsu Ketsugi-kyo*, and there are no Sanskrit scriptures in India in which it can be found. Moreover, it is the general opinion of bibliographers that *Daibontenno Monbutsu Ketsugi-kyo* must be a spurious work of a later date in China, and the tale of “Sakyamuni Holds Up a Flower” is criticized as a fabrication without historical basis.

True it may be that the story cannot be supported by history, yet this does not mean that the fact of Dharma transmission in Zen from a Master to his disciple is to be denied. It is perfectly natural that someone whose experience was based on such transmission should give a Zen interpretation to the fact of Dharma transmission from a Master to his disciple as we see it here in this koan. The significance of the koan and its historical basis belong to two different orders, and the former will not be affected by the latter

Needless to say, the life of Zen as a religion is in the fact of religious experience personally attained by each individual. From the beginning, initiation following any ritual or scripture was utterly denied in Zen. Zen transmission is always based on the actual experience of each individual, and at the same time the experience of a disciple and that of his teacher are to be one and the same. This is why Zen, while insisting on the absolute necessity of standing on one’s own experience, attaches much importance to teacher-disciple transmission and takes it most seriously. If this is neglected, the light of the true, live Zen tradition will immediately go out. Thus “teacher-disciple transmission” in Zen is described as “mind-to-mind” and has come to have a unique significance and tradition.

Even though it may be mind-to-mind, the term “transmission” already implies transfer in space and time from A to B. For Zen, which is solely based on one’s own religious experience and denies initiation or inheritance in any form at all, this concept of transfer is an inexcusable misapprehension. A new, creative meaning has therefore been given to the word transmission, explaining that it is “transmission of the untransmittable,” or “to transmit is to be identified with.” In other words, “teacher-disciple transmission” in Zen is “teacher-disciple identification,” where the experience of the teacher and that of his disciple are in complete accord with each other. They fundamentally originate in one and the same Truth.

From very early times it has been said, “It is like pouring water from one vessel into another exactly like it.” The disciple’s experience has always to be approved by his teacher. It is a unique characteristic of Zen transmission that the teacher’s verification is thus essential, for by it the genuineness of the Zen tradition has been maintained.

Whether the story of “Sakyamuni Holds Up a Flower” can be supported by history or not is a matter of historical and bibliographical interest and has nothing to do with the fact of teacher-disciple transmission of Zen. That is to say, the fact of transmission in Zen transcends historical concern, and in this sense the koan has a profound Zen significance for us even today.

This koan says that long ago Sakyamuni was at Mount Grdhrakuta and one day took his place in front of the audience. Before the people who were waiting eagerly for the talk, he held up a lotus flower and did not utter even a word. Sakyamuni held up a flower—did he really give a talk, or not? It has all been settled in this instant of holding up a flower.

I am a flower. The whole universe is a flower. If a thought of consciousness moves, it is gone altogether. Gutei stuck up one finger; Joshu cried out “Mu!” Are these the same, or are they different?

Those who know will immediately know it. Those who can see will at once see it. All has been thoroughly expounded—what a wonderful talk! An old Zen Master sings:

As I see it with my mind of no-mind,
It is I-myself, this flower held up!

We should not, however, just draw the conceptual conclusion that I and the whole world are one.

There is a sentence in *Hoke-kyo*: “The meeting at Mount Grdhrakuta is definitely present here.” This means that the talk on Mount Grdhrakuta is vividly taking place now, right before us. Does this sentence ask us, then, to listen to Sakyamuni’s grand talk of holding up a flower directly here and now, transcending space and time? Does it tell us to grasp the Truth before the dawn of human consciousness?

Nobody was there, however, who could hear the grand talk of Sakyamuni with his heart and soul. All the audience remained silent and there was no response to it. Then the Venerable Kasho broke into a smile. The Venerable Kasho alone fully appreciated this “talk of no talk” and responded to it with a smile.

The “smile” created a stir in Zen circles and from earliest times has been the cause of divided opinions.

Talk of no talk, hearing without hearing. What did Kasho get from the flower held up by Sakyamuni? After all, what is the real significance of Kasho’s smile? This must naturally be the core of the question; and the actual Zen experience of each individual is the key to clarify the point.

A Zen Master said, commenting on the Venerable Kasho’s smile, “A child does not mind the ugliness of its mother.” Why could Sakyamuni’s holding up a flower be ugly? The Zen eye has to be opened to see it. Again, how did Sakyamuni dare to be ugly? It must have been his irresistible compassion toward his disciples that forced him to be so. Kasho understood Sakyamuni’s ugliness and appreciated it, and in his smile the wonder of the teacher-disciple identification was accomplished. Sakyamuni, the teacher, and Kasho, the disciple, are sharing one “family shame.” Tell me what this “family shame” is. Here lies the secret of “holding up a flower” and “a smile,” the secret of complete teacher-disciple identification in silence.

Another Master commented, “The father stole a sheep, and the son acknowledged it.” This was originally a popular saying in China to illustrate silly honesty, that “the father did evil, which his son disclosed.” The comment is significantly interesting in that father and son are in admirable accord with each other while taking different standpoints. We must here, however, clearly understand what “stealing a sheep” really means.

After all, without our own transparent experience, we are unable to appreciate what the old Zen Masters said or did. Be just a flower; be just a *nyoi*. Be it through and through. Where is the universe then? Here give me a word. You can be silent; or you can be smiling, as you will. And here for the first time you can truly grasp this koan.

There is a *mondo* in connection with the story of “Sakyamuni Holds Up a Flower.” One day a Governor asked Master Ungo, “It is said, ‘The World-Honored One gave a secret talk of holding up a flower, and Kasho by smiling did not conceal it.’ What does this mean?” Ungo called out, “Oh, Governor!” “Yes, Master,” replied the Governor. ““Do you understand?” asked the Master. When the Governor said, “No, I don’t,” Ungo told him, “If you do not understand, it shows that the World-Honored One did make the secret talk. If you do understand, it means that Kasho did not conceal it.”

What an interesting *mondo* this is on the koan of holding up a flower! If the flower held up by Sakyamuni is fragrant throughout the universe now, the Governor's "Yes, Master" must be echoing throughout the world now. Let those who can get it, get it.

At Kasho's "breaking into a smile" Sakyamuni verified the complete accord of their spirituality and declared in front of all the people, "I have the all-pervading True Dharma, incomparable Nirvana, exquisite teaching of formless form. It does not rely on letters and is transmitted outside scriptures. I now hand it to Maha Kasho." He thus testified to the fact of Dharma transmission to Kasho.

From olden times, such transmission of the untransmittable has been called Buddha-to-Buddha "testimony." This is not the handing over from Sakyamuni to Kasho, but from Sakyamuni to Sakyamuni. It is not the succession of Kasho to Sakyamuni, but Kasho to Kasho.

The teacher-disciple transmission in Zen is possible in such a manner, and teacher-disciple accord is verified in such an identification. This is why in Zen to transmit is to be identified with, and it is defined as "the transmission of the untransmittable."

Now Dharma, to be thus transmitted by nontransmission, transcends all objectification and conceptualization. It should be the "ever unnamable 'it.'" How ridiculous it is that Sakyamuni gave this unnamable "it" such long and complex names, saying, "I have the all-pervading True Dharma, incomparable Nirvana, exquisite teaching of formless form. It does not rely on letters and is transmitted outside scriptures." The moment we are deluded by the name, its life is all gone. Here, however, we can see Sakyamuni's infinite compassion toward his fellow beings in later generations. Perhaps it would help if I should try to clarify the meaning of each word used in Sakyamuni's list of unnamable names.

"True Dharma" is the Dharma of as-it-is-ness, where not even a thought of consciousness is working. It is "it," or the Truth that transcends space and time.

"All-pervading" means it is the source of creativity and wonderful working, which is absolutely free, perfect, inexhaustible, and infinite.

"Incomparable Nirvana" is the never-born, never-dying Reality itself. It is the subjectivity that freely expresses itself and works under all different situations.

"Formless form." A form takes a shape and shows discrimination. When there is no discrimination, there is no form, and this formless form is the true form of Reality, for it is the self-manifestation of "Mu."

"Not relying on letters." The Truth itself has no room for intellection to enter, for experiential fact does not belong to the realm of logic and intellect.

"Transmission outside scriptures." A teaching once expounded, however excellent it may be, is already a conceptualized corpse. The experiential fact is the foundation that gives birth to teachings and dogmas. It can never be restricted by teachings and dogmas and is always new, alive, and creative.

These explanations about names and words, though they may be helpful, are after all no more than conceptualization and objectification of one kind or another, and we should not be deluded by them. Negatively expressed, not a particle of "it" is there. Affirmatively explained, the True Dharma pervades the universe. Therefore just as it is, "it" is here right now. If you truly cast yourself away, True Dharma is ever luminous here and now.

The Truth Sakyamuni Buddha attained under the bodhi tree is nothing but this. The Dharma that has been transmitted from Buddha to Buddha, Master to Master, is nothing but this. We should clearly understand that apart from the fact experienced and testified to by each one of us there can be no true Zen tradition, no active Zen transmission.

TEISHO ON MUMON'S COMMENTARY

Mumon said, “Yellow-faced Gotama is certainly outrageous. He turns the noble into the lowly, and sells dog-flesh advertised as sheep’s head. I thought there was something interesting in it. However, at that time if everyone in the assemblage had smiled, to whom would the True Dharma have been handed? Or again, if Kasho had not smiled, would the True Dharma have been transmitted? If you say that the True Dharma can be transmitted, the yellow-faced old man with his loud voice deceived simple villagers. If you say that it cannot be transmitted, then why was Kasho alone approved?”

Master Mumon, trying to point out the true significance of the koan, gives his characteristically unique and free comment. As usual, his commentary is full of sharply ironic remarks, but if we cling to their superficial meanings the true significance is at once lost. We have to grasp his real meaning beyond the expressions used.

“Oh, you yellow-faced Gotama!” Mumon addresses Sakyamuni in a familiar and teasing tone. “You should not be so absurd and be talking such nonsense. Talking to a rich nobleman, you call him poor and lowly; crying wine you sell vinegar. Stop deceiving people like that. I thought you would be a little better, but good gracious! It was after all sheer nonsense.” Mumon is addressing Sakyamuni, the Wise Man of the Sakyas, in a familiar and rather informal way by calling him “yellow-faced Gotama.” Gotama is his personal name, and by yellow-faced he means golden-faced—golden because he is enlightened. Mumon goes on, “crying wine you sell vinegar”: you use fine phrases like “all-pervading True Dharma” and then hold up a flower. This comment should not be taken as merely teasing words. Thus with an air of severely denouncing Sakyamuni’s talk of holding up a flower, Mumon in fact highly praises him.

He is saying, “In my eyes, everybody is a rich nobleman with the Buddha Nature. Why do you regard all people as poor and lowly and treat Kasho alone as a nobleman? Besides, pretending to give a good talk, you just held up a flower in silence. Aren’t you going too far in deceiving people?” With such abusive language Mumon upholds Sakyamuni’s exquisite talk of no talk.

Mumon’s comment becomes even more cutting: “It was fortunate for you that only the Venerable Kasho understood it and broke into a smile. Suppose all the people had smiled at it. How then would you have handed on the True Dharma? If, on the contrary, the Venerable Kasho had not smiled, could the True Dharma possibly be transmitted?” Mumon is urging our clear grasp of the “transmission of the untransmittable” from a Master to his disciple. His penetrating inquiry continues to the end, where he says that if you mean that there is Dharma transmission in Zen, you are deceiving people; and he asks, “If you say there is no transmission in Zen, then why did you declare that you had handed it to the Venerable Kasho alone?” By such pressing inquiries Mumon tries to illustrate for his disciples the true significance of the transmission of the untransmittable in Zen and to show them how its teacher-disciple transmission is possible.

Master Hakuin gave his teisho on this koan: ‘Everybody, male or female, without exception, has the True Dharma. Still, Sakyamuni expressly declared that he had handed it to Kasho alone. He is certainly deceiving people. Yet I won’t say that there was no transmission taking place. I now hold up my *hossu* like this, the truth of which no dull ordinary monks can ever grasp. Kasho grasped it, so he smiled. There will not be too many who can fully appreciate the real significance of this smile. When one gets it, there is the true transmission.’ We should carefully listen to what Hakuin says as well as to Mumon, and clearly comprehend what transmission in Zen is.

TEISHO ON MUMON'S POEM

A flower is held up,
 And the secret has been revealed.
 Kasho breaks into a smile:
 The whole assemblage is at a loss.

In the second line of this poem the word translated “secret” is literally “tail,” a word which sometimes implies a “hidden face under a mask.” Here it means secret—the Truth that transcends words and letters. In this poem Mumon comments sharply on Sakyamuni’s holding up a flower, “I have seen through your trick and I won’t be deceived.” By saying that he has seen through the secret of the transmission of the untransmittable, Mumon shows the depth of his own experience. “You may make a fool of everybody else, but not me,” Mumon tells Sakyamuni.

Tell me what kind of flower this is, the flower Sakyamuni held up. It is the flower that will never be burned by fire, never wilt in frost. It is the flower that is neither big nor small, and in the fields and mountains it is ever bright and fresh in bloom, in the past or at present. At the same time, it is the flower that will immediately be gone if one becomes attached to words and logic and is deluded by concepts.

In the last two lines of the poem Mumon simply repeats the story: “Kasho alone broke into a smile in full appreciation, but all the rest of them were utterly at a loss.” I can almost hear him tell his disciples, “It is not an old tale but your own question now!” He is in fact telling them, “You, every one of you, are holding the eternal flower in your hand, or rather, are the flower itself. Why don’t you open your eye?”

An old Zen Master symbolically commented on the koan in a poem:

The rain last night scattered the flowers;
 Fragrant is the castle surrounded by running waters.

How are we to read the essence of Zen in this beautiful poem? Does it imply that everyone, whether he smiles or not, is living in the same True Dharma? Truly there is not a spot where the sun does not shine, yet pitiable are the blind who have to live in darkness.

Permit me to make one additional comment. In one of the popular books I once read a criticism of this koan of “Sakyamuni Holds Up a Flower.” It said, “Because Mumon saw the koan through cloudy binoculars, he failed to see the exchange of delicate human feelings shining at the back of the story.” This is a surprising misunderstanding. What the koan illustrates for us is the Truth of Zen seen in Dharma transmission through teacher-disciple identification, and such an ethical question as the beauty of the human relation between the teacher and his disciple is not at issue. Zen points to the fundamental realization from which ethics and other human virtues originate.