

The Urban Well

The Mercy Seminar 2024, Term II.5

Kyogen's Man Up a Tree

KOAN

Master Kyogen said, "It is like a man up a tree who hangs from a branch by his mouth; his hands cannot grasp a bough, his feet cannot touch the tree. Another man comes under the tree and asks him the meaning of Bodhidharma's coming from the West. If he does not answer, he does not meet the questioner's need. If he answers, he will lose his life. At such a time, how should he answer?"

MUMON'S COMMENTARY

Even though your eloquence flows like a river, it is all to no avail. Even if you can expound the Great Tripitaka, it is also of no use. If you can really answer it, you will revive the dead and kill the living. If, however, you are unable to answer, wait for Maitreya to come and ask him.

MUMON'S POEM

Kyogen is just gibbering;
How vicious his poison is!
Stopping up the monks' mouths,
He makes their devil's eyes glare!

TEISHO ON THE KOAN

Master Kyogen was a contemporary of Gyozan, who died in 890, so he must have lived toward the end of the T'ang dynasty.

Kyogen presents this koan out of his compassion and states it in this drastic form in an effort to smash through the restraint of human discrimination at one blow. He wants us to cast away our discriminating mind by means of the koan.

Asking "the meaning of Bodhidharma's coming from the West" may be taken as asking the meaning of "the essence of Zen."

There is an interesting story of how Kyogen attained his satori, which undoubtedly motivated him to ask this strange question here. The story is well known in Zen circles, and as it may help us to understand him as a Zen Master, I will digress and tell it here.

Kyogen was a man of erudition and strong memory, and was unusually bright and talented. From his childhood he was fond of learning. He first studied under Master Hyakujo, but as the latter died soon after he started, he continued his Zen training under Isan. Isan recognized unusual genius in him and wished somehow to open his spiritual eye. One day he called Kyogen and said, "I do not want to hear from you what you have learned from scriptures nor the result of your accumulated studies and

speculations. Just give me the essential word about your Self before you were born, before you knew either east or west.” At this unexpected question, Kyogen was quite at a loss and could not utter a word. He searched diligently, but each time he presented an answer to Isan he found the Master flatly rejected it. Finally, with his energy all exhausted, Kyogen came to Isan and implored him, “Please teach ‘it’ to me!” “Even if I might show ‘it’ to you,” said Isan, “it is my word and has nothing to do with your answer.” And he paid no attention to Kyogen’s plea.

In disappointment, Kyogen took out his books and the notes from his years of study and burned them all, saying, “Pictures of cake do not satisfy one’s hunger.” Driven to despair by his inability to break through the barrier, he gave up his training and left Isan’s monastery in tears. He visited the grave of National Teacher Echu and decided to lead his life as a nameless gravekeeper there. Although his biography does not give us any details, his inner struggle and searching must have continued and increased day and night, even after he despaired of his ability and decided to live as a grave-keeper. His religious Great Doubt must have been intensified to the point where the slightest touch might result in an explosion. The opportunity was ripe.

One day while cleaning the yard, Kyogen threw the rubbish into the bushes. A stone hit a bamboo. He heard the crash, and at that moment, all of a sudden, he was enlightened and burst into laughter in spite of himself.

He immediately returned to his hut and changed his clothes. Burning incense, he prostrated himself in the direction of Isan and praised the virtue of his teacher. “The compassion of Isan is indeed greater than that of my parents. Had he taught ‘it’ to me when I asked him, I could never have had this great joy today.”

As we can see from the above story, Kyogen was originally a man of intelligence and learning. Because of that, he had to go through even greater contradictions and more painful struggles to transcend his sagacity and learning. He succeeded beautifully, however, in his spiritual struggle to transcend intellectual contradictions and become a Great Master of real peace and freedom. His unique training processes and experiences gave him the background to come out with a koan such as this.

Truly, a life controlled by its dualistic intellect may be likened to the man in this strange koan proposed by Kyogen. A man up a tree who hangs from a branch by his mouth is asked by another man under the tree the essence of Zen. If he answers, he will fall from the tree and die. If he does not answer, he cannot meet the need of the questioner. How can he break through the barrier of this great dilemma? Unless one faces the inescapable crisis and has once had the experience of dying, one will not have true freedom. Master Mumon stresses this in his commentary on the first koan: “In studying Zen, one must pass the barriers set up by the ancient Zen Masters. For the attainment of incomparable satori, one has to cast away his discriminating mind.” When his discriminating mind is got rid of and cast away, what kind of spirituality will he have? What kind of life will he live? Kyogen says in the koan “at such a time.” This means “just as he is,” with no thought working, no consciousness moving. If he hangs from a tree, just as he is hanging, the essence of Zen is alive and manifest there.

A Zen Master, commenting on this koan, said, “Now, setting aside the man up a tree, what is ‘the meaning of Bodhidharma’s coming from the West’ when you have fallen from the tree?” This also points to “at such a time.” If one has fallen from the tree, just as he has fallen, the essence of Zen should be alive and manifest there. Here and now, just as it is—this is “it.” What other answer can be possible? Apart from the fact, concrete, lucid, and penetrating, there is no Zen.

What is essential in Zen is “to cast away one’s discriminating mind.” When this is done, for the first time one can transcend yes and no, good and evil, and can declare that everything, everywhere, is “it.” One can then truly grasp Kyogen’s Zen.

TEISHO ON MUMON’S COMMENTARY

Mumon comments, “Even though your eloquence flows like a river, it is all to no avail. Even if you can expound the Great Tripitaka, it is also of no use. If you can really answer it, you will revive the dead and kill the living. If, however, you are unable to answer, wait for Maitreya to come and ask him.”

Kyogen demands in the koan that his disciples give the answer “at such a time.” Mumon, however, commenting on it, says that “at such a time it is of no avail at all, even if you have eloquence flowing like a river and could expound the Great Tripitaka.” If you can give a truly apt answer at such a time, you are then absolutely free and are capable of reviving the dead and killing the living. That is to say, you can freely take satori away from the so-called enlightened one who is attached to satori, and turn the ignorant one to enlightenment. Certainly you are capable of it, for you are now a man of absolute freedom, having fundamentally solved the contradictions in the mind.

Mumon goes on to say that those who are not yet capable of giving the truly apt answer at such a time will have to wait for the advent of Maitreya Buddha, the Buddha of the future who, it is said, will appear in this world 5,670,000,000 years after Sakyamuni Buddha’s death, to save human beings. They can ask Maitreya. This is not just a sarcastic remark but a compassionate condemnation by Mumon, who thus encourages his disciples to return from the abyss of death.

TEISHO ON MUMON’S POEM

Kyogen is just gibbering;
How vicious his poison is!
Stopping up the monk’s mouths,
He makes their devil’s eyes glare!

“Gibbering” is a translation of *zusan*. In former times there was a man in China named Zusan who used to write eccentric poems that did not rhyme. Hence “*zusan*” came to mean anything without rhyme or reason. Here it means nonsense uttered at random. In the first two lines Mumon is saying, “What an absurd Master this Kyogen is! And how vicious is the poison he has presented here!” We may interpret this comment as describing how fatal his question is, which has taken the lives of so many monks. Zen, however, sometimes uses a device called “praise by means of denouncing.” By heaping abuse upon him, Mumon is really admiring the extraordinary capability of Master Kyogen. Mumon finishes his poem, saying, “To such a dreadful question by Kyogen, those who regard themselves as Zen experts would be unable to utter even a word in reply. They would just have to shut their mouths with their eyes wide open, trembling in fear.”

Let me add, however, that just when Kyogen has stopped up the monks’ mouths and has made their devil’s eyes glare, Zen—“it”—is ever alive and manifest. Mumon is clearly answering Kyogen. If you fail to get “it,” so vividly presented here, Zen is completely out of your reach.