

# The Urban Well

## The Mercy Seminar 2024, Term II.6

### Keichu Makes Carts

#### KOAN

Master Gettan said to a monk: “Keichu made a cart whose wheels had a hundred spokes. Take both front and rear parts away and remove the axle: then what will it be?”

#### MUMON’S COMMENTARY

If you can immediately see through this, your eye will be like a shooting star and your spirituality like lightning.

#### MUMON’S POEM

When the vividly working wheel turns  
Even an expert is lost.  
Four directions, above and below:  
South, north, east, and west.

#### TEISHO ON THE KOAN

There are many stories about Keichu, who was an expert cart-maker in ancient China; none of them is definitely known to be true. It is said that he made the first cart to be pulled by a horse, in the days of Emperor U of the Ka dynasty, and that he made a grand cart whose wheels had a hundred spokes and amazed the people. In this koan Master Gettan, referring to the story of this extraordinary cart, tries to awaken his disciples to the Truth of Zen.

Master Gettan Zenka lived at Mount Daii in Tanshu. Although he was a Zen Master who preceded Mumon in the same line of Dharma transmission and lived comparatively close to Mumon’s time, little is known about him.

One day Gettan said to a monk, “Long ago Keichu is said to have made a most splendid cart with wheels having a great number of spokes. If, however, the hubs and the body of the cart are taken away and the axle is removed, what will become of it?”

Literally this question may be interpreted as follows: “Keichu made a wonderful cart by putting together various parts. Now, if all these parts are taken away and the very shape of the cart is gone, what will become of it?” Based on such an interpretation, there are many who take it as a doctrine of *sunyata*, which teaches that everything is primarily empty. There is an old Japanese poem:

Put grasses together and tie twigs one to another:

Behold, here is a cottage!  
 Dismantle it and take it to pieces:  
 Behold, it is the original grass field!

Quoting this, they would say that a cart can take shape when various parts such as an axle, hubs, spokes, wheels, etc., are all put together. When it is dismantled and taken to pieces, the very form of the cart is there no more. This may be one Buddhist doctrine, but it is not Zen.

“Then what will it be?” Gettan presses you for the answer. He does not ask for a philosophical interpretation but wants you to show your dynamic Zen working. This is a very sharp and direct demand. In other words, he asks you to open your eye to the Truth of Zen, where human consciousness has not yet started to work. Gettan asks you to “take both front and rear parts away, and remove the axle,” that is, to directly transcend the form of a cart. To objectively transcend the form of the cart is to subjectively cast away one’s own existence. It is to transcend the dualistic distinction of I-and-you, subject-and-object, and to live and work in the transcendental and yet individualistic Oneness.

Gettan’s question “What will it be?” has such direct and profound significance! It comes out of his great compassion!

With reference to “What will it be?” I should like to add a few words. In Japan there is a famous saying to describe the secret of horsemanship: “No rider on the saddle; no horse under the saddle.” To become an expert rider, one must practice diligently, undergoing long and difficult training, until finally he achieves the state of complete unity of man and horse, where there is neither the rider nor the horse to ride on. Further, he must come to the stage where he is not even conscious of the unity itself. This is the *samadhi* of “both transcended.” When both the rider and the horse are forgotten, they can best work and exhibit their utmost skill. This sounds very much like the work of no-mind, or Oneness of subject and object in Zen. Keichu, the expert cart-maker, was in a similar *samadhi*. When he made a cart, he himself was a cart through and through. When such vividly working wheels turn, with both front and rear parts taken away and the axle removed, certainly even a master must be at a loss. Keichu was an unparalleled past master in cart-making.

Here, however, a very important question is involved. Can we regard an expert rider as a Zen man and look upon an expert cart-maker as a Zen Master, because of their skill and *samadhi* when they are at their work? The answer is definitely No. Why? When one puts his soul and body into his work, often he will be in the state of *samadhi* where he forgets himself and transcends the distinction of subject and object. Such unity has its own value and beauty and may justly be admired. But it is limited in most cases to a particular aspect of one’s work, which is psychologically or technically separated from the rest of his life. One will be in that *samadhi* only while he is engaged in that particular work, and his unity may be gone once he comes out of it. The vital point is that his *samadhi* is not based on a fundamental awakening which will completely change his personality and life.

Zen teaches *samadhi* and emphatically encourages the monks in training to achieve oneness of soul and body, identity of subject and object. It requires the monks to have no-mind and to be no-self. Since this training process in Zen seems to resemble psychological or technical disciplines in art, many people are likely to confuse them.

Training in Zen aims to bring about a fundamental change in the whole personality, by which one attains realization (which is called satori) and lives a new Zen life as a new man. Zen maintains that this experience of attaining religious personality is essential. It is therefore basically different from forgetfulness of oneself in an art or skill, which covers only one special aspect of one’s life. Let me repeat: the ultimate aim of Zen is to accomplish a completely new religious personality by the satori

experience, and to live Zen at every moment. Without this fundamental experience, whatever special skill or psyche one may have, it is not Zen at all.

In this koan Master Gettan first speaks of Keichu's unparalleled skill in cart-making, which was the result of his long training, and ends the koan with "then what will it be?" Referring to hard and assiduous training in art, which resembles that in Zen, as a means of leading the monks to the final spiritual leap, Gettan stressed the necessity of having the fundamental realization experience that should change their whole personality. The last sentence is thus most important; without it the problem posed loses its Zen significance as a koan.

Often I come across people who just naively believe that *samadhi* in art, or no-mind in expert skill, is the same as that of Zen because of their superficial resemblance. According to them there can naturally be dancing Zen, painting Zen, piano-playing Zen, or laboring Zen. This is an extremely careless misunderstanding. They have failed to see the basic difference between Zen and psychological absorption in an art or skill.

#### TEISHO ON MUMON'S COMMENTARY

"If you can immediately see through this, your eye will be like a shooting star and your spirituality like lightning," comments Mumon.

His comment is direct and to the point: "If you can immediately see into the experiential truth of taking away both front and rear parts and removing the axle, your eye will be like a shooting star and your spirituality like lightning; there will be no room for even a thought of consciousness to get in."

In other words, he asks you to immediately cast away all your consciousness and be directly the cart itself. Then there is neither you nor the cart, neither moving nor not-moving. Transcend them all, then you are utterly free in heaven and on earth, to kill or to revive. Even lightning cannot interfere with your transcendental freedom. Now, what could this transcendental freedom be? It is illustrated in the poem that concludes Mumon's commentary.

#### TEISHO ON MUMON'S POEM

When the vividly working wheel turns  
Even an expert is lost.  
Four directions, above and below:  
South, north, east, and west.

Mumon, referring to a cart, figuratively describes the marvelous working of Oneness. When this transcendental cart of no-form runs with all its parts cast away, it moves but is unmoving; it does not move, but is moving—this is the true moving which even a supersonic spaceship can never achieve. Even an expert will be utterly unable to use his discrimination here.

An old Zen Master sings:

The mind turns and works  
In accordance with ten thousand situations.  
Wherever it may turn,  
It is mysteriously serene.

I raise my hand, and the sun and moon lose their light under my hand. I lift my foot, and the vastness of the earth is altogether gone under my foot. There is no room at all here for intellect.

Four directions, above and below: south, north, east, and west. Everywhere the wonderful cart of no-form turns. Everything is the work of the true Self of no-form. How then, let me ask, does it turn right here, right now? “Four directions, above and below: south, north, east, and west!”