

The Urban Well

The Mercy Seminar 2024, Term II.4

Opening Comments

The reading for this evening raises the issue of the direct transmission of the Dharma, or the Truth, from mind to mind, without words or scriptures, beginning with the transmission from the Buddha to Maha Kasho, who is Mahakasyapa in Sanskrit, about whom we heard in the Flower Sermon earlier this term. Shibayama Roshi addresses this issue directly: “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?” (2). Shibayama Roshi acknowledges that the story told in this koan is likely not historical, but he does not think that this challenges the truth of Dharma transmission in the Zen Buddhist tradition. “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” (2). This is because the contemporary experience of a student attaining the same mind as his or her Master confirms the truth of Kasho’s reception of the Dharma from the Buddha. “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” (2). It seems to me that the reception of Zen in the United States has tended to focus exclusively on the claim that Zen satori must be attained by each individual, while almost completely ignoring the centrality of the Master-student relationship in the transmission of the Dharma. This is why I think Shibayama Roshi goes to such lengths to focus on the centrality of this relationship in the Zen tradition. “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” (2).

But how does this transmission take place? How can one have a tradition that does not depend on scriptures or words for its transmission? And how can one mind wordlessly transmit itself to another mind? Shibayama Roshi thinks that the term “transmission” is not an accurate reflection of how the Zen tradition is handed on, as it makes it sound like there is a transfer of something in space and time, whereas the experience of satori transcends all space and time.

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 (2).

The “transmission of the untransmittable” happens when the Master recognizes the same mind in his student that he attained when working under his Master. This is what happens between the Buddha and Maha Kasho in the koan for this evening. “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” (2). This also means that the Master can falsify alleged claims to the apprehension of Dharma by his student. We saw this last week when Gutei’s student held up one finger. Even though the gesture accurately reflected the Master’s teaching externally, Gutei cut off his finger because it was not expressing his identification with his Master’s mind. We also saw this falsification in the case of Hakuin in the commentary on Joshu’s “Mu!”

In the biography of Master Hakuin we read the following moving story of his first encounter with his teacher, Master Shoju. Shoju 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, Shoju took hold of Hakuin’s nose and gave it a twist. “I am quite at ease to take hold of it,” said Shoju, 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.

And we saw this last week in the story that Shibayama Roshi told on himself regarding his own experience in the *sesshin* during his training to become a monk.

I struck the bell of sanzen and stepped into the Master’s room feeling like a lamb dragged to a slaughter house, for I did not have anything to say. In a fix, I instantly raised my hand and exclaimed, “The Truth pervading the whole universe!” The Master, with piercing eyes, stood up and drove me out of the room of sanzen, saying, “You good-for-nothing monk! You had better return to college!” I shall never forget the pain I had at this Master’s rebuke.

On the other hand, the Master needs to verify the genuineness of the breakthrough of the student, as in the case of the Buddha and Maha Kasho.

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.

However, as Shibayama Roshi points out, if the student has attained the same mind as his Master, then there is no transmission of that mind from one individual to another, but rather the acknowledgement that they both share the same mind.

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” (4).

This is possible because the Dharma does not belong to the mind of the Buddha, so that only he can give it to those whom he chooses, like Maha Kasho. Rather, the Dharma does not need to be transmitted, because it is always already here. We are like fish who do not know they are swimming and living in water. We are living in Dharma, in Absolute Truth, all the time. The problem is that we do not realize this through our own personal awakening. “Truly there is not a spot where the sun does not shine, yet pitiable are the blind who have to live in darkness” (6). Once we do awaken to enlightenment, we share the mind of our Master because we are both aware of the Dharma that surrounds us. This is what Zen Buddhists mean by “mind to mind transmission.”

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 (4).

This also gives us insight into the use of language by Zen Buddhists. The awakened mind gives rise to teaching, in an attempt to guide others to attain the same experience, for it is an experience of eternal freedom and eternal peace. However, the language that testifies to and expresses the experience of awakening cannot of itself transmit that awakening to me. This is something that each of us must attain on our own, in relationship to our Master. As Shibayama Roshi says,

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 (4).

We will only truly know what the testimony means when we truly cast ourselves away, to see the True Dharma that is luminous here and now.