

# The Urban Well

## The Mercy Seminar 2024, Term II.5

### Opening Comments

In my opening comments for tonight, I would like to return to a question that we pondered at end of our discussion last week, regarding Shibayama Roshi's discussion of the role of interpersonal emotions and relations in Zen Buddhist training.

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.

The "fundamental realization" of which Shibayama Roshi speaks is satori, or enlightenment, which is the transcending of all dualistic and discriminating consciousness, by the realization of eternal Truth, giving rise to infinite freedom and eternal peace. However, even though Zen Buddhists do not focus on the ethical question of the beauty of the human relation between the teacher and his disciple, Shibayama Roshi repeatedly focuses on the *compassion* that the teacher has for his or her student. We see a clear instance of this in the opening of his teisho on Kyogen's koan for tonight:

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 (V.1).

The language Shibayama Roshi uses here is quite telling. Kyogen states the koan in this **drastic** form in an effort to **smash through** the restraint of human discrimination in **one blow**. The compassion of the Zen Master is therefore quite forceful, and is entirely oriented toward bring his student to the Great Doubt, which can seem to the student, and to us, as being entirely cruel and heartless. We see this in Kyogen's relationship to his own Master 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.

Were my teacher to pay no attention to my plea, in his refusal to answer my very urgent and existentially pressing question, I would experience that as heartless indifference or even cruelty, not as compassion. However, this response by Master Isan led Kyogen to abandon all of his knowledge based on his vast collection of scripture, and to work through his Great Doubt alone, as a grave-keeper. One day as he was working, he heard the sound of a rock hitting bamboo, and he suddenly realized satori, which caused him to burst into laughter.

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” (V.2).

Isan’s compassion for Kyogen was precisely his refusal to answer his plea to teach him “it,” because Isan knew that “it” cannot be taught, “it” can only be personally realized by the student. Isan also knew that this realization is only possible when one enters into one’s Great Doubt alone. We see a fuller description of the Master’s compassion for his student in Shibayama Roshi’s discussion of Joshu’s “Mu!”:

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 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. *It was the compassion of the Masters that led them to try thus to intensify their disciples’ Great Doubt, their spiritual quest, and finally lead them to satori by breaking through it.* If here one really breaks through this koan, which uniquely presents before him the core of human contradiction, he can clearly see for himself with his genuine Zen eye what these mondo are trying to tell us (II.5).

Shibayama Roshi’s description of the Great Doubt, toward which the teacher out of compassion directs his student, makes it clear how cruel the Master’s compassion can appear to be.

“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 (II.8).

Hence it was only *after* Kyogen had broken through his Great Doubt and attained satori that he could see his teacher’s compassion toward him. This is why Zen does not focus on the beauty of the human relation between Master and student. If the Master is acting out of compassion for his student, there is nothing beautiful about this relationship, nor is there anything like an “exchange of delicate human feelings.”

In Zen training one has to strive with soul and body to transcend his dualistic discriminating consciousness. One has to come to the ultimate extremity where any slightest touch may effect a great change in his personality, so fundamental as to be described by saying that “the earth splits and the mountains collapse.” He has to plunge into the abyss of “sheer darkness altogether,” as an old Master expressed it (III.2).

Shibayama Roshi sees this kind of compassion in Kyogen’s presentation of the koan for this evening. “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” (V.1). He also sees this kind of compassion in what could appear to be Mumon’s sarcastic comment about waiting for the advent of Maitreya Buddha for the answer to Kyogen’s koan. Where some might only hear sarcasm, Shibayama Roshi also hears compassion.

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 (V.3).

As a Master, Mumon tries to awaken us to the urgency of striving for satori in this life. For Buddhists, both Theravada and Mahayana, the best birth from which to attain enlightenment or satori is a human birth. If we squander this rare opportunity, we may have wait 5,670,000,000 years for another opportunity. Such urgency can lead the Master to treat his student quite harshly, as happened to Shibayama Roshi in an interview with his own Master.

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.

The pain is part of the training, for without it the student will continue to say things that are true on the surface, but which are false because they do not come from the student’s own personal realization. As we have seen, the same thing happened to Hakuin, when he replied to Master Shojū’s question about Joshū’s “Mu!” by elatedly replying:

“Pervading the universe! Not a spot whatsoever to take hold of it” As soon as he had given that answer, Shojū took hold of Hakuin’s nose and gave it a twist. “I am quite at ease to take hold of it,” said Shojū, 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.

Most dramatically, we saw this kind of infliction of pain when Master Gutei cut off the finger of his student, which he had raised in imitation of his Master. Far from being appalled by this act of violence, Shibayama Roshi praises Gutei for this, for by means of inflicting this kind of pain on his student, Gutei brought the student to satori.

Gutei called out to him as he ran away screaming with pain. When the boy involuntarily turned his head, Gutei stuck up one finger. At this, fortunately the boy was awakened to the True One Finger. In the extreme pain penetrating the universe, he grasped the Truth of One Finger. The boy, losing his finger, attained the true finger and eternal life. This Zen of One Finger is nothing but the Truth pervading the whole universe. It can never be found in the boy’s imitating finger, which is like a corpse. The marvelous capability of Gutei in cutting it off should certainly be admired.

As a concluding thought, I cannot help but think of what one comes to see if one looks at the compassion of Jesus in relation to his disciples through the lens of the Zen Master in relation to his student. For like the Zen Masters, Jesus can appear to be quite cruel, as when he rebukes Peter and calls him Satan, and says that if anyone would follow him, they must deny themselves, take up their own cross, and follow him. Those who save their lives will lose them, and those who lose their lives for his sake will find them. One also sees the same urgency behind this cruel compassion, for Jesus is convinced that this life is the time of decision which will determine one’s relationship with eternity. This is not to say that Jesus is a Zen Master, only to say that one of the blessings of comparative theology is that one can come to recognize things that are present in one’s own tradition when one looks at it through the eyes of another.