

The Urban Well

The Mercy Seminar 2024, Term II.6

Opening Comments

In the reading for this evening, Shibayama Roshi tries to make clear to us that seeing with the Zen eye is different than knowing Buddhist Dharma, even Dharma as challenging as the teaching of *sunyata*, which one finds in the Diamond and Heart Sutras and which is foundational for Zen life and practice. Speaking of the koan for this evening, he says:

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.

It is important to note that he is not saying that *sunyata* or emptiness is not an important doctrine for Zen Buddhists, given the daily chanting of the Diamond Sutra. What he is insisting upon, though, is that the koan is not an illustration or example of this doctrine, so that one can answer Gettan’s challenging question by asserting the truth that all reality is empty in a philosophical way. Rather, Gettan is challenging us to *see with our Zen or spiritual eye* the emptiness of all things. As we just heard in the Lectio Divina:

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.

Shibayama Roshi is also at pains to distinguish this experience of transcendental yet individualistic Oneness from the way popular culture and religion have used the term Zen to describe isolated but intense experiences of oneness, which he calls *samadhi*. With reference to the Japanese saying, “No rider on the saddle; no horse under the saddle,” he points out the surface similarity of *samadhi* to *satori*. “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.” However, Shibayama points out this similarity in order categorically to deny that this is the experience of Oneness that Zen is speaking about. “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.” The reason lies in the depth and duration of the experience. There is nothing wrong with the experience of *samadhi* either in one’s work or one’s meditation practice. Speaking from my own experience, the experience of *samadhi*, no matter how fleeting, can give me hope that I can continue to transform my consciousness, in order to bring greater peace and stillness to my heart and soul, and to lengthen the time I have between an action and my own reaction, especially an action that might upset or anger me. However, Shibayama Roshi insists that these experiences of *samadhi* are not the same as Zen *satori*.

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.

Unlike the experience of *samadhi*, which sadly does not last as long as we would like, *satori* is an experience of awakening that fundamentally transforms one’s life, so that one dies to what one was before and is reborn as a fundamentally different person. As he says in our second reading, “One has to cast his ordinary self away and be reborn as a new Self in a different dimension. In other words, the student must personally have the inner experience called *satori*, by which he is reborn as the True Self.” This fundamental experience of awakening via death and rebirth is essential in Zen. As Shibayama Roshi says, “Zen calls this experience ‘incomparable *satori*,’ or ‘to die a Great Death once and to revive from death.’”

In particular, the experience of *satori* brings with it the attainment of what Shibayama Roshi calls “transcendental freedom.”

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.

We saw reference to this kind of freedom on the first reading, in Mumon’s opening poem:

Gateless is the Great Tao,
There are thousands of ways to it.
If you pass through this barrier,
You may walk freely in the universe.

Commenting on this poem, Shibayama Roshi says,

As repeatedly stressed, Zen is not something to be philosophically thought about or intellectually understood. It has to be the concrete fact personally attained by one’s realization experience. Thus in Zen the religious experience of breaking through the gateless barrier is the absolute requisite for every student. When he has actually broken through the barrier, he can for the first time declare as an actual fact that it is gateless. He is then wholly free, and there will be nothing in the universe that interferes with his creative working. Until one has this experience, his no-gate remains an idea and a concept.

The freedom of *satori* is a *creative* freedom, as we can see in the way that Zen Masters delight in creating koan, out of their compassion for our own experience of enlightenment. It is also creative in the sense of the artwork we have been contemplating, as well as the poetry that was created by Zen practitioners like Basho.

Another aspect of this transcendental freedom is addressed by Master Rinzai:

Master Rinzai says, in describing this absolute freedom of striding through the universe, “Once you are the Absolute Master [subjectively], wherever you may be, everything is true for you. Circumstances may change but they cannot affect you.”

The transcendental freedom of *satori* means that you are free from being determined by your circumstances, because you have come to see the world and yourself with your spiritual or Zen eye, which was always already inside you. Thus in eternal freedom you are no longer attached to the Buddha, to his Dharma, or even to your own *satori*. “Zen postulates absolute freedom in which all attachments

and restraints are completely wiped away. The Buddha therefore is to be cast away and so are the Patriarchs. Any restraints whatsoever in the mind are to be cast away. For the one who has passed through the abyss of Great Doubt, transcending subject and object, you and I, and has been revived as the True Self, can there be anything to disturb him?" Not surprisingly, therefore, another fruit of this transcendent freedom is the eternal peace it brings. "How wonderful it is to live such a serene life with perfect freedom, the spiritual freedom of the one who has attained religious peace!"

Another aspect of this freedom is one's freedom from the discriminating mind, the mind of I and you, subject and object, knower and known, self and world. Mumon says, "For the attainment of incomparable satori, one has to cast away his discriminating mind." As Shibayama Roshi points out, this is why Zen Masters started creating and using the koan in the training of others. "In actual training its role is to smash up our dualistic consciousness and open our inner spiritual eye to a new vista." Once one passes through the gateless barrier set up by one's Master in the koan, one attains transcendental freedom.

The phrase "incomparable satori" indicates the eternal emancipation or absolute freedom that is attained by directly breaking through the Zen barrier. In order to break through it, Mumon stresses that one must once and for all cast away his discriminating mind completely.

"Discriminating mind" is our ordinary consciousness, which is dualistic, discriminating, and the cause of all sorts of illusions. Mumon asks us to cast this away.

Casting away the discriminating mind, casting away the self, is key to the realization of eternal freedom, when one is reborn as the true self of no-self.

This is the moment when the I and the world are both altogether gone. This is exactly the moment when one's discriminating mind is emptied and cast away, that is, when he is revived as the self of no-self. At this mysterious moment, he is like a dumb person who has had a wonderful dream, for he is fully aware of it, but is unable to use words to express it. The Absolute Nothingness is awakened to itself. This is the moment of realization when subject-object opposition is altogether transcended. To describe it we have to use such words as inexpressible or mysterious.

I can think of no better way to conclude my reflections for this evening than with this quote.