

Today I want to discuss a very important aspect of the koan in Soto Zen training. A great deal has been written about the koan, especially on its use in Rinzai, but very little has been said about the way we use it and unfortunately there are many misunderstandings about it.

When a person is taught to do zazen in our school, he is told to just sit; not to hold on to thoughts or to push them away, but continually bring the mind back to just sitting. On the surface it seems very simple, but when you first begin you start to realize just how much the mind chatters and grabs hold of this and that. When you are taught Zazen in Rinzai, you are given a koan by your teacher that you must work on, and whenever your mind wanders off you bring it back to bear on the koan. Because of the superficial differences in the method of meditation, many people have said that Rinzai uses koans while Soto does not; in other words, they say there are no koans in Soto Zen. This opinion usually comes from people who are only casually involved in Zen and who have never fully entered Zen training. Nothing could be further from the truth, for as far as I am concerned, Zen without koans is false Zen and quietism; without koans there is no true training. Let me explain exactly what I mean.

Recently at a Chosan ceremony where Roshi stands in front of the altar and all the trainees come up individually to ask questions of the master, a junior trainee asked, "Please tell me what is my biggest koan?" and Roshi replied, "you." The trainee was looking for a special exotic problem external to himself and instead was pushed back to look at himself. So the koan is to be found within one's self. We call this the Genjo-koan or the koan that arises naturally in everyday life. In fact all recorded koans and stories are simply the natural koans arising. Let us take for example Shakyamuni Buddha. His koan was, "Why is there birth, old age, disease, and death?" This koan was not given to him but arose of itself out his own training. And everyone since Shakyamuni Buddha has had his own natural koan which he has transcended through diligent training.

The reason I say that Zen without koans is quietism is that too many people use Zazen as a means to passivity. They do not deal with themselves or with daily life. There is far more to Zen than just sitting on a black cushion looking like a Buddha statue. A bowl of oatmeal can do better. You must<sup>sic</sup> with great energy - brightly - and be alert to your koan arising in everything you do. If you look at yourself carefully, you will soon understand what I mean. Zazen and daily life are one; they are not nor have they ever been separate. If the koan arises in daily life, then it is also a rising in Zazen. If it does not arise in daily life, or you are not aware of its appearance, then it also does not arise in Zazen.

Therefore in everything you do, the koan is showing itself; in your waking up, lying down, stopping, going, talking, eating - the koan is there. Another meaning of the word "Genjo" is "The truth as it exists is complete." So that you (everyday life) are complete as you are. You lack nothing. The Truth appears naturally in daily life; the koan appears naturally. When the koan is dealt with and transcended, the Buddha Mind is understood. Keizan Zenji was enlightened when he heard the phrase, "Everyday life (Genjo) is none other than the Buddha Mind." So you are complete, whole, and your own koan, the complete koan, is nowhere to be found but directly in front of you and until you learn to deal with it every minute, every step, you will never begin to train in Buddhism no matter how long you may sit staring at the wall.

Remember that training comes from our guts, not from our head. It must never be understood superficially or intellectually. It is very sad that so many approach Buddhism just on the surface. Only through training yourself in your own daily life can you really understand the old koans and scriptures because then you will be living them from your guts.

The koan is ever changing, widening, deepening; it is like a kaleidoscope with new facets continually emerging. Therefore the koan is being solved over and over again, from different levels. Life becomes the unfolding of the great koan and the one great enlightenment which we all share. The gates of the Truth are many and through training, we enter them all.

When reading the Journal selections from Roshi's diary, "The Wild White Goose" it is very important to understand them from the point of view of the Genjo-koan. Don't get stuck and entangled in the soap opera, the external events, but try to understand what is happening with your heart. Try to see everything as an opportunity to understand and live Zen in every day life, surrounded by greed, hate, and confusion; in the middle of a roaring fire. To get all caught up in the personalities and problems in the diary is just like grabbing on to thoughts and emotions during Zazen. Only when we let our thoughts flow on do we deepen our meditation and see the Genjo koan appearing in a thousand different facets and the spirit of true training going on, always going on, always holding still in the centre regardless of external events.

Now I want to discuss an aspect of the Genjo-koan from Tozan Zenji. This particular case is a very applicable one for most of us and I hope it will help each of you begin to see your own particular koan. Tozan Zenji was a very famous master in the ninth century, and along with Sozan, founded the Soto school. He handed down the "Most Excellent Mirror Samadhi" and formulated the five ranks, both of which are held in high esteem in all schools of Zen. Here is the story:

Once a trainee asked Tozan Zenji, "Winter comes and summer comes. How can we avoid them?" Tozan said, "Why not go where there is no summer or winter?" The trainee asked, "Where is this place?" Tozan replied, "In summer, feel hot; in winter, feel cold."<sup>1</sup>

Now let us look at what Tozan is pointing out to his disciple. The trainee asks, if I may para-phrase: Winter and summer come, hot and cold, good and evil, right and wrong, pleasure and pain, joy and sorrow, certainty and doubt. All these things oppress me. How can I escape from them? Now this is a very common aspect of the Genjo-koan; many people try like mad to escape from life and from themselves. People who misunderstand Zen think that is what we are doing, withdrawing or escaping from the world, but this has never been so. When Roshi entered Soji-ji, one of the old Roshis pointed to the kyosaku (the stick used to beat trainees in the Far East) and said "Daily life." He was trying to tell Roshi that every day life, with all our own faults, all the rights and wrongs, joys and sorrows, ups and downs, beats one into seeking enlightenment, and as the kyosaku cannot be avoided in the meditation hall, so daily life cannot be avoided also. In Zen, when a trainee is scolded or beaten or praised or ignored, he bows with gratitude.

This trainee, like many of us, wants to find a way to escape from life, avoiding what is unpleasant or harsh or not according to what he wants. Daily life was causing him pain because he did not face it squarely, accept it, and bow to it. But tell me, how can you ever escape from birth and death by running away? No matter where you run or how fast, there is nowhere you can hide where it is not. Where ever you are, there also is the Buddha Mind. Do you know the Psalm from the Bible that goes:

Whither shall I go from thy spirit?  
Or whither shall I flee from thy presence?  
If I ascend up into heaven, thou art there:  
If I make my bed in the netherworld, behold thou art there.  
If I take the wings of the morning, and dwell in the uttermost part of  
the sea.  
Even there would thy hand lead me and thy right hand would hold me.<sup>2</sup>

"There is no ship that can take you from yourself," says one of the modern poets. So tell me, what do you do?

Tozan's answer is beautiful: Why not go where there is no change, no summer, no winter, no pleasure, no pain, no love, no hate, no good, no bad, no life, no death." Yes there is a place. This is the great compassion of the Buddhas and the patriarchs; the positive embracing mind showing itself - always completely still and accepting. So the trainee then asks, "Where, tell me, where is this place?" and Tozan says, "In summer, feel hot, in winter be cold."

Do you understand what he is saying? If when summer is here, you are completely hot and when winter comes, you are thoroughly cold without complaining, then you become one with it and you are free from the heat and the cold. You can avoid life and death by completely accepting them. You can end suffering by becoming one with it; then nothing can move you away from your true centre and nothing can harm you. In the Shushagi, Dogen says, "Should you be able to find the Buddha within birth and death, they both vanish; all you have to do is realize that birth and death (daily life) as such should not be avoided and they will cease to exist (get in your way)." Things get in our way because we and things are separate. When there is oneness, there are no obstacles. Nothing gets in our way.

Once a trainee asked Joshu Zenji, "In whom does the Buddha cause passion?" "Buddha causes passion in all of us" replied Joshu. "How do we get rid of it?" asked the trainee. Joshu replied, "Why should we get rid of it?" Joshu is saying the same thing as Tozan. The truth of Zen comes to us when we accept and embrace everything without exception. If you cut yourself off from anything by trying to avoid it or run away from it or throw it away, then you are saying there is something unclean, that there is something not part of the Buddha Mind. But how could that be? If you do this, then the only thing unclean is your delusion. "All things," says the Scripture of Great Wisdom, "are in their self-nature, void, unstained, and clean." ALL THINGS. The shadows, darkness, fog - they are only projections of your own mind and do not of themselves exist. When we remain still and embracing, they are nowhere to be found; in fact, they were never there in the first place.

When someone receives ordination as a trainee, he is given a begging bowl by his master. This bowl is called the round head of the priest in Zen, and every day of the Buddha's life, he put on his robe and carried his begging bowl. Whenever the Buddha went out to beg for food, just as many of the trainees still do in the East, he would gratefully accept whatever was put into the bowl, be it lamb, curry or plain rice. The bowl has come to mean the ideal of complete acceptance. In the Buddha's time, there were many yogis and ascetics in the forest who were horrified because the Buddha ate meat, chicken, whatever and they said that it was unclean. Shakyamuni gave a very simple lecture saying that what was truly unclean was discriminatory thought, ill will, pride, judging others, and so on, and not eating meat. So really Buddhists have never been vegetarians in the real sense, but have learned to accept whatever is offered with gratitude. Nor have Buddhists ever gotten into the various "food fads" that come and go with people saying that this food is bad and that food is good. Fashionable ideas and trends change from day to day. If you get involved in them the truth of Zen will never be yours because you will be cutting up the Buddha Body instead of realizing its wholeness. To truly carry the begging bowl and wear the monk's robe is what training is all about.

So the koan of all-acceptance is one of the greatest facets of the Genjo-koan and every trainee must grapple with it every moment. All of life is within this koan. This is the same koan that Shakyamuni Buddha faced under the Bodhi Tree and it was through all-acceptance that he became enlightened. This is also the meaning of Amitabha Buddha's Pure Land in Shin Buddhism. When you drop your discriminatory thinking, selfish opinions, then you see that everything is

clean and pure and always has been. When Ranzan Zenji experienced enlightenment for the first time, he said, "When I raised my head to look about me, I saw that the sun from the first had been round."<sup>3</sup> It was only our view that was wrong. You suddenly find that you were never lost or chained up and that you have always been in your true home. You no longer fight against things. The sky is blue, the grass is green, and on a face there are two eyes and a nose. Just as it should be. But if you reject and discriminate, then you create heavens and hells, rights and wrongs, good guys and bad guys, and the dreams and nightmares go on forever.

"If a man goes along with things to the end," says Chang Tzu, "then things will come to him. But if he sets up barriers against things, then he cannot find room enough even for himself, much less for others." Watch out for this. You are the child of Buddha, so be careful not to kill Buddha in your daily life. Without exception, everything is the Buddha Mind, so if you cut yourself off from anything, then you are killing the Buddha inside yourself.

Now there is another good example of this from the story of the Mustard Seed which comes from the time of Shakyamuni Buddha. It is a very beautiful tale and it shows how a teacher simply points out the Genjo-koan arising and does not manipulate in any way. Here is the story:<sup>4</sup>

She was called Kisa Gotami or Frail Gotami. She was born in Sravasti in a poor house. When she grew up, she married going to the house of her husband's family to live. After a time she gave birth to a son and they accorded her respect. But when that boy of hers was old enough to play and run about, he died. Sorrow sprang up in her. Taking her son on her hip, she went about from house to house saying, "Give me medicine for my son!"

Impermanence - all things that are born must pass away. Most of us understand this only with our heads, but to come face to face with it and accept it is another matter. To accept life and death is to train in the Genjo-koan. Do not think you need a crisis or great sorrow to understand this koan. It is showing itself all the time. Gotami asks for medicine for her son. She is really saying, "Help me." Haven't you heard that the Dharma is the medicine for all suffering?

Whenever people encountered her, they said, "Where did you ever meet with medicine for the dead?" So saying they clapped their hands and laughed in derision. She had not the slightest idea what they meant. Now a certain wise man saw her and thought: "This woman must have been driven out of her mind by sorrow for her son. But as for medicine for her, the Buddha alone is likely to know." Said he: "Woman, as for medicine for your son, only the Buddha knows. He resides at a neighboring monastery. Go to see him and ask."

Kanzeon Bodhisattva, the aspect of Great Compassion, appears in a million forms, saving all beings.

"The man speaks the Truth," thought she. Taking her son on her hip, when the Buddha sat down to teach his disciples, she took her stand in the outer circle of the congregation and said, "O Exalted One, can you give me medicine for my son?"

The Buddha seeing that she was ready for training, said, "Yes, Gotami. You did well in coming for medicine here."

This is the same YES of Tozan. Is there a place? Yes there is. Is there medicine? Yes, there is. The whole of Zen is expressed in that one word, YES. It is the complete positive acceptance and embracing. It is the meaning of bowing in Buddhism. Do you know the story from the Debkoroku about Makakasho and Ananda? Makakasho called, "Ananda." Ananda replied, "Yes?" Keizan Zenji comments, "It was as if an echo replied to a voice and one fire sprang up between two stones. Ananda was enlightened because he understood the Truth

that is (was, and will be) existing from master to disciple." The master calls and the disciple answers. The Buddha Mind calls and the Buddha Mind answers.

There is something like this in the bible story of Abraham. "And God said unto Abraham, 'Abraham, Abraham,' and he answered, 'here am I' Can you hear the total peace and acceptance in that simple, "Here am I?" The 'here' shows completely the acceptance of one's own self and nowhere to hide or escape. The 'am' is the whole of existence - past, present, and future - and means the truth is complete as it is. The 'I' is without self and is the Buddha Mind. It is the same when Shakyamuni Buddha said, "I am enlightened instantaneously with the whole universe." We call this 'I' the Lord of the House and it is understood when the selfish ego is transcended and your own true nature realized. Can you understand the naive mind of trust and openness of this YES? Ten thousand times a day, we have the same opportunity as Ananda and Abraham to say Yes with our whole heart, with a single mind. Every time we are asked to do something by the Chief Junior or one of our seniors, every time we meet another on our way, we bow. Does your heart say YES or do you get lost in the web of ideas, self-opinions, and arguments? YES cuts through all this. It is bowing positively that we come to accept all things and face the Genjo - koan, otherwise we shall forever be tossed about on the surface. So many people ask, "How do you learn to accept everything? How can I stop running away?" Ten thousands times a day the opportunity presents itself, but so many of us are busy looking the other way... So when Gotami asks for medicine, the Buddha says YES.

"Yes, Gotami. You did well in coming here for medicine. Go enter the city make the rounds, and in what ever house no one has died, from that house fetch tiny grains of mustard seed." "Very well, reverend sir," said she.

The Buddha simply points out the Genjo-koan. It is not artificial and there is no manipulation. Gotami must realize and solve her own koan by herself, through her own personal experience. Always in Zen the disciple makes the running. You must come yourself and ask for teaching. The Buddhas do not drag you to enlightenment nor do they manipulate their students. When the koan shows itself, they simply point it out. So Gotami goes into the city, willingly and positively. Most people laughed at her, but life and death are no laughing matter and the Buddha understood this well and wished to help her.

Delighted in heart, she entered the city, and at the very first house she said, "The Buddha bids me fetch tiny grains of mustard seed for medicine for my son. Give me tiny grains of mustard seed." "Yes, Gotami," said they, and brought and gave to her. "This particular seed I cannot accept if in this house someone has died." "What say you, Gotami. Here it is impossible to count the dead." "Well then enough. I'll not take it. The Buddha did not tell me to take mustard seed from a house where anyone has ever died."

The koan is unfolding. Training is active, not passive. Too many people think that all they have to do is just sit there and suddenly there'll be a flash of lightning, and lo, they will have become a Buddha. It never happens like that. The koan is right there. Deal with it.

In the same way she went to the second house, and to the third. Thought she: "In the entire city this must be the way. This the Buddha, full of compassion for the welfare of mankind, must have seen." Overcome with emotion, she went outside the city, carried her son to the burning ground, and holding him in her arms, said, "Dear little son, I thought that you alone had been overtaken by this thing that men call death. This is the law common to all mankind." So saying she cast her son away in the burning ground.

Everything must pass on: men, women, animals, Buddhas, and patriarchs. So she understands the koan directly through her own experience and not from the words

or understandings of others. She sees that peace comes through the acceptance and not through the running away from life and death. But you must realize that she understood only the first level of the koan, and there are many levels and facets, and the koan must grow and change and develop.

Then she uttered the following verse: No village law, no law of market town, no law of a single house is this. Of all the world and all the worlds of gods, this only is the law; that all things are impermanent.

Everything flows on. If you hold onto anything, even enlightenment, you can never know the true meaning of training, for it is an endless flow. "If you do not cling to training," says Dogen Zenji, "your hand will be full of enlightenment; if you do not cling to enlightenment, your whole body will be filled with training."

Now when she had so said, she went to the Buddha. Said the Buddha to her, Gotami, did you get the grains of mustard seed?

She found the medicine that cures all ills but her hands are empty.

"Done reverend sir, is the business of the mustard seed. Only give me refuge!"

She has already found one within herself, within acceptance. When winter comes, Take refuge in winter; when death comes, take refuge in death. Therefore every minute complete and there is no winter, no summer, no life, and no death. Just the endless going on.

All of this must be understood directly and it all comes out of Zazen. If you keep on with your sitting, putting out a great deal of effort, you will begin to understand Tozan's hot and cold. The Truth is found right where you are, and if you can find it in the middle of everyday life, then you will always be at peace wherever you go.

1. Original Teachings of Ch'an Buddhism, Chang Chung-Yuan, Patheon Books
2. Psalm 139.
3. Zen Dust, Ruth Fuller Sasaki, Harcourt, Brace & World
4. Buddhist Parables, E.W. Burlingame, Yale Univ. Press. or Teachings of the Compassionate Buddha.

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