

The mind is wonderfully pure and clear

(an article by Albert Low)

I would like to comment on some letters from Ta Hui, whose students were mainly lay people. He came after the golden age of Zen, which was an enormously creative period in China. It is interesting to note that when there is a burst of spirituality, it is invariably accompanied by a burst of creativity.

His death poem is rather good. He said:

Birth is thus
Death is thus
Verse or no verse
What's the fuss?

The first letter begins:

"Buddha said, if you want to know the realm of Buddhahood, you must purify your mind, making it as clear as empty space, and leave false thinking and all grasping far behind. »

What does it mean: to purify one's mind? What is an impure mind? When you are working on a koan - e.g. 'who am I?' - you must not start from: 'I do not know who I am, but if I continue to look I shall eventually find out.' As long as you are fixed in this attitude towards the practice, you can only land in a state of confusion and complete frustration. This kind of approach can take many forms. One of the most subtle is that you look outside the mind, outside knowing, in order to resolve the question "What is knowing?" or "Who am I" You look outside I am to know who I AM. Another way of saying the same thing is that one tries to know something . What am I? Very often one asks this question after making the assumption 'I am something, what kind of something am I?' In other words, one is already operating within the prison -- the prison is already real.

One must start from, 'I know.' Better still, 'I am knowing.' I am and knowing are not two. It is the same when we come to purify the mind. To purify the mind one must see into the mind as inherently pure. One must see into 'from the beginning, not a thing is.' The impure mind is the mind of things. It is the mind that has thoughts fixed with words, so that things then take on an independent existence. And when we talk about things, we include emotions - I am sad, or I am anxious, or I am successful or unsuccessful. This is also a way of saying, "I am something." These are ways by which the mind becomes impure. To see into 'I am anxious,' that is to see 'I-am -knowing-the anxiety' is the only way that we can purify the mind. We cannot reject or extirpate or cut out thoughts, words, and concepts. To see into "I am anxious" in this way is like a process

of distillation. The word we like to use is discernment . Discerning is not the same as separating or discriminating. Ramana Maharshi said that ' seeing into' is like pulling a piece of grass from its sheath. It is that distillation process which is the purifying of the mind. And, paradoxically, the only way we can achieve this is by seeing into the inherent purity of the mind -- know without the sheath of knowledge.

True self is no self, no self is purity. This self which is involved and identifies, which complains, which rejoices, which succeeds and fails, this is a monster, a hybrid; two foreign elements 'I am' and 'something' are joined as though it were a whole. Very simply, it is this impurity that is our suffering.

Ta Hui goes on to say,

'You must purify your mind, making it as clear as empty space.' When one sees that true self is no self, the sense of being obstructed, the sense of having barriers, and at the emotional level, having frustrations, anxieties and depression, this drops away, dissolves. These obstructions are like mist. When you have driven into a patch of thick mist you put the fog lights. But this only makes the mist more opaque and you feel you are driving into a wall. But then a gust of wind swirls the mist away and you see that everything after all is quite clear, there is no wall, no obstruction, you are not driving into something. No obstruction is liberation. In Tibetan Buddhism one doesn't speak of the great awakening but of the Great liberation. This liberation is the liberation from impurity, the liberation from the monster, the mixture.

He says, 'thus your mind will be unobstructed wherever it may turn.'

One of the feelings that we can have when we approach the practice in this way, is the feeling of walking through walls, or walking through barriers. At one moment it is as though one is totally stymied, one can find no way to penetrate the barrier that is so heavily in front of one. The koan ' on top a 100 ft pole, an iron cow gives birth to a calf' is a wonderful picture of this wall and of walking through the wall. Another way of looking at it is as though one is crushing honeycomb in honey. It is a feeling of pure release.

'The world of Buddhahood is not some external world where there is a formal Buddha, it is the realm of the wisdom of a self-awakened sage.' This isn't really news to us because we do not have the belief that there is a Buddha realm, a pure land, where Amida Buddha resides. We do not have this mythology. But we do have the notion of heaven. People in Quebec where the Christian tradition has been rather heavily pounded in, have lingering in what we might call the unconscious, the notion that there is a possibility of a world that resides above or beyond or outside this world, a world that is pure positivity with nothing negative. A world of light, music and smiles.

For a time, at a secular level, this heaven was translated into utopia - the last utopia was communism. People believed it was possible to have a purely positive world; that negativity was a factor that had been brought into the world by the way we had been brought up and by the distorted institutions that had come from this poor upbringing. If

we could find, so they believed, some way to get rid of this ignorance we would be left with a purely positive world where everyone would love one another and everyone would share things in common, there would be no greed and so no need for war.

This yearning for heaven, utopia, is deeply imbedded in the human being and it is obvious where this comes from. One knows, and this knowing is purity. But we are unable to enter into knowing without form. So therefore we translate this knowing into a form, which is heaven, or an idealized person like Christ or the Virgin or Buddha, or else into a utopia.

Ta Hui is pointing out that the realm of Buddhahood, utopia or heaven, or the perfect person, is not some external world where there is a formal Buddha, some perfect, positive world; it is the realm of the wisdom of a self-awakened sage. We must be careful - this is not saying that the realm of a self-awakened sage is a pure positive world, it isn't. The awakened state is not awakening into heaven. This is the upanisadic, Vedic tradition. This is a tradition that leads one to search for samadhi and our practice is not one that leads to samadhi. Instead our practice leads into the world, into the ambiguities and dilemmas of the world. It leads not into a new world but into the old world made new. Instead of seeing ambiguities and dilemmas in a negative way, we see them as opportunities for creativity, a chance for dancing and songs to be the voice of the dharma. Ambiguity is only a barrier when we see the world in terms of either or, in terms of opposition, in terms of you or me, me or the world, me or God.

He says, "once you are determined that you want to know this awakened realm, you do not need adornment, cultivation or realization to attain it."

When he speaks of adornment he is referring to the way people get themselves dressed up, as monks or priests or bishops, etc. and call themselves roshi or sensei or guru. All of this is quite extraneous. To give oneself the title of roshi, sensei, reverent, venerable - all of this is by the wayside, it is pouring from the empty into the void. He talks of cultivation, which often takes the form of subscribing to a number of precepts. Some monks take up to 250 precepts or vows and so their life is hedged in by restrictions and limitations and prohibitions. All of this comes from believing that by changing our behavior, or by changing the way others perceive us, we can become more spiritual people.

He says, 'you must clear away the stains of afflictions from alien sensations that have been on your mind since beginningless time.'

'Alien sensations' are what we mean when we say that being something, knowing something, feeling something, stains the mind. Knowing something crystallizes, freezes or fixes and so stains the mind. Like Hakuin says, 'like water and ice, without water no ice, outside us no Buddhas.' The flowing Buddha nature, the flowingness of life, is frozen or stained or becomes impure. When you are asking who am I, various ideas, thoughts or beliefs come up, not necessarily in a fully articulate fashion, most

often it comes in a confused way. Discerning "I am not that" causes these thoughts to drop and brings clarification.

'So that your mind is as broad and open as empty space, detached from all clinging of the discriminating intellect, and your thoughts, unreal vain thoughts too, are like empty space.'

We are not trying to get rid of the discriminating, unreal, vain thoughts. Once we try to get rid of them, we make them real. Thoughts are not real but our interest in them and our identification with them, make them real. We must work from the purity of the mind.

When you are working from the purity of the mind these thoughts become more and more transparent. One always has these flitting thoughts going through the mind. I don't know whether a supreme Buddha would have them, but quite likely he would as they are products of the brain and quite outside our control - we don't create them, but we do give them credence, attention, reality.

He says, 'all the clinging and discriminating and unreal thoughts too are like empty space. »

He then says, "Then this wondrous, effortless mind will be unimpeded wherever it goes.'

This is liberation, but the mind is not unimpeded because other people or the world do not now threaten it, but because other people or the world have never threatened it. Without your permission no one can ever make you suffer.

He says, "An ancient worthy has a saying, 'to look for the ox, one must seek out its tracks.'

To follow the path, seek out mindlessness. Where the tracks are, so must the ox be." The ox of course is a symbol of the mind and eventually it is of the awakened mind. We have the ox herding pictures over the door as we come into the Montreal zendo. In the last few pictures is of the man sitting there without the ox, and then there is no man, just the trees and fields, and then there is the man in the market place.

Ta Hui says that to look for the ox one must follow its tracks; to follow the path, seek out mindlessness. Mindlessness is 'from the beginning not a thing is.'

He says, "Mindlessness is not being inert and unknowing like earth, wood, tile or stone.

It means that the mind is settled and imperturbable when in contact with situations and meeting circumstances."

This imperturbability can only come about when one is operating from a condition of knowing that is to say from a condition of purity. We said at the beginning that a transition is necessary; a change must take place in us. Instead of asking 'what can we do about our life and all its problems,' the question turns round and we ask 'what do we mean, our life? What is this life?'

To look at this more concretely, instead of asking, 'what can I do about this anxiety I have all the time about losing my job?' we ask, 'what is this anxiety?' Instead of saying 'I am going to have to find out the origin of this anxiety in the past such as - "I believe it is because we didn't have a lot of money when I was young and there was all that insecurity" or " I don't have a lot of self confidence because my father shouted at me a lot" we see into the knowing that supports this anxiety. Searching in the past can of course have value for people who have psychological problems, but this is not the way to work when engaged in a spiritual practice. We must liberate ourselves from ourselves, from this knot we call the mind, this twisted tortured knot. And we do this by seeing into mindlessness, by seeing into the inherent purity of the mind.

Two expressions are used: mindlessness and mindful. One says one must be mindless and one says one must be mindful. Dogen says to know the self is to forget the self, and yet Gurdjieff constantly says one must remember the self. On the face of it looks as though they are contradictory. But to remember the self, you must forget the self. To see into this inherent purity that you are, you must see into the impurity that is blocking the way, that is hiding this inherent truth. And in the same way, to be mindful means one is totally present, but one can only be totally present when one is not constantly fidgeting with thoughts, feelings and anxieties. This is the mindless-mindful state.

Ta Hui says, 'it does not cling to anything, but is clear in all cases, without hindrance or obstruction, without being stained, yet without dwelling in stainlessness'

What he is saying is so important because when we talk about the inherent purity of the mind, he is not talking about an empty mind, a mind with nothing in it. It would be impossible to live under those circumstances. People try to do this, they go into hermitages and try to shut off all distractions, but this is not the direction in which to go. Some people still feel that thoughts are an obstruction and what one has to do is in some way suppress them or get rid of them. But he says, 'without dwelling in stainlessness' - we are not trying to develop a particular state of mind in which to dwell; there is not a fixed state of mind called awakening. Awakening is the absence of all fixed states, of all preferred states of mind.

He says, 'viewing the body and mind like dreams or illusions, yet without remaining in the perspective of dreams and illusions empty nothingness.'

Misguided teachers teaching the Vedanta, self-styled gurus, and to some extent pop new age philosophies often teach dreams and illusions empty nothingness. The world is only a dream. The world is only an illusion. But this is not what Zen says; it does not say the world is only an illusion. If one says the world is only an illusion, it seems as though some greater reality lies beyond it, to which one can compare this illusory world. According to the Vedanta this reality is the atman, the Brahman, the god, or heaven. But this is not the way of Zen. It isn't that there is this dream and we must wake up from the dream into an exalted real world. One wakes up to the dream.

One does not say the world is only a dream, one says the world is a dream. Seeing the world as a dream means that one no longer sees the world as a collection of things.

There is the realization of the interpenetrability of everything. When you dream there is always awareness as an intrinsic part of the dream. The objects in the dream do not stand on their own, they are part of the dream. It is this that makes the dream a dream. It is said there are these lucid dreams where this is no longer the case, that you actually see objects as objects, but most of us do not have lucid dreams. One could say that to see the world as a dream is to see the seeing. I have used before the notion that the world is suspended in the medium of the mind, of knowing. I used the analogy of a glass of water into which some ink is dropped, and this drop of ink spreads out in the water. When it is suspended in the water, you cannot separate the ink from the water. But the ink is not the water. In a similar way, we could say that what we call the world is suspended in knowing. The seeing is as important as the seen. The seen is not the dictator. When one sees it in this way one can then say the world is a dream.

We can say that without remaining in the perspective of dreams and illusions, empty nothingness. The empty nothingness is when one says it is only a dream.

'Only when one arrives at a realm like this can it be called mindlessness. If you haven't attained true mindlessness and just go by the verbal kind, how is this different from the perverted Ch'an of silent illumination?

« Some people get a whiff of the truth and from then on set themselves up as teachers, and it becomes more and more a verbal world that they are referring to. 'The perverted Ch'an of silent illumination' - this is also called the cave of pseudo emancipation. This is something that Zen masters are constantly warning us about, that we mustn't get into this, that it is a fabricated awakening, and it is death to the spiritual process.

Then he comes out with his very famous saying: 'Get to the root, don't worry about the branches'.

This sums up so well our practice. This is why I say don't worry about trying to resolve all the various problems of life - life is trouble, life is a problem. We can see life in the perspective of purity or we can see it in the perspective of duality. Getting to the root is cutting out the belief in something which by its very presence creates other somethings, and these are often in opposition with each other, and so we get conflict, suffering, pain, then anger and greed, and in general, human existence.

He says, 'emptying this mind is the root.'

Let us say rather that seeing into the emptiness of mind is cutting the root. 'What is mu?' 'Who am I?' following the breath - this is what it is about? When you are asking who am I, you must look at all the things you think you are - very rarely do they come up as a clearly articulated concept: I am this! One just has a vague sense of something, that one has taken for granted. I am something - that is a given. There is a feeling of tension and we think this is reality, we take it completely for granted. If you ask somebody why they say the world is real, if they really look they will see that it is

because they have this tension. There is no connection between, say, the room and this tension; and yet the perception of the tension makes the room real.

To start from where one is and patiently, dedicatedly, give oneself to perceiving, discerning what is truly at issue as one sits there this is practice. Instead, so often people reach beyond what is immediately present because they are in a hurry to 'get there'. They are either reaching beyond it, or deciding they can't do it. Start from where you are - it is like lighting a fire, you take a few leaves and get it going, then you add a couple of twigs, and then a few more, then a small branch, until the whole forest is afire - but this is only because you nursed a feeble beginning. We must be willing and patient with our feeble beginnings. What are you? It is a simple question. Just look. You don't have to think about it. What are you? Or, What is mu? You are saying Mu, you are knowing Mu - so what is it you are knowing? What is that?

Once upon a time, before the combine harvesters, a farmer would reap the harvest and then thresh it and finally put his wheat in a sack. People would come and buy the sacks of wheat. But they wouldn't empty every sack and examine it. They would just take a handful, a sample. And from that small handful they would assess the value of the whole harvest.

You have Mu. That is a small sample - 'if you see into a spec of dust, you see into the whole world.' We say the world is a mixture of thought, things, experience. So you have Mu, this is a thing. Now what is it? Just stay with it, work with it. As one works with it, so one awakens deeper and deeper resonances, responses, to this questioning. One realizes at a deeper and deeper level that what one is questioning is the whole of reality. What does it mean 'to be'. What does that mean? What is isness? What am I? What is it? This is the root, and you work in this way, gradually discerning - the patient way you are working with it, the way you keep bringing your mind back to it - even though the mind wanders all over the place and it is dry and so on, but never mind what is it, what am I, what is 'is? ' Whatever 'is' is, that is what you work with. Whatever is there is a sample of what it is all about. And so whatever is there can be the way into the purity of the mind. Whatever is there, is Mu. Whatever is there, is 'I am something,'

Let go of the protest, let go of the fears, let go of the sense of inadequacy - or if you want to, take that as another sample and use it. So, I am afraid. Let us now work on this 'I am afraid.' Or 'I can't do this.' OK. Take that as a sample, work on it. You are already whole and complete, you lack nothing. From the beginning, all beings are Buddha. The mind is wonderfully pure and clear.