

A Non-Buddhist Questions the Buddha

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Albert Low

This morning we will take koan 32 in the Mumonkan and also 65 in the Hekiganroku. It is : A non-Buddhist questions the Buddha. We will use the Hekiganroku version and so therefore get Engo's introduction.

It has no form and yet appears.
Filling the ten directions, it is boundless.
It responds spontaneously, arises in emptiness.
Understanding three when one is raised
Detecting the slightest deviation at a glance
Though you may be so powerful
That the blows fall from your stick like raindrops
And your shouts sound like thunderclaps
This is not yet equal to the man awakening.
What is the condition of such a man ?

See the following.

The case : A non-Buddhist once asked the World-Honored One, « I do not ask for words nor do I ask for no words. » The World-Honored One just sat. The non-Buddhist praised him saying, « The great compassion of the World-Honored One has opened up the clouds of my ignorance and enabled me to be awakened. » Making his bows of gratitude he departed. Ananda then asked Buddha, « What realization did the non-Buddhist have that made him praise you like that ? » The World-Honored One said, « He is like a high-mettled horse which starts even at the shadow of the whip. »

And then there is Setcho's verse :
The great wheel turns not.
If it turns it goes both ways at once.
The brilliant mirror on its stand
In a flash, beauty, ugliness are discerned.
Beautiful and ugly distincted
Clouds of illusion open
No dust is found in the gate of compassion.
A fine horse watches for the shadow of the whip.
It goes a thousand miles a day,

Once the Buddha made his mind turn back.
Should the horse come back when I beckon,
I'll snap my fingers thrice at him.

So lets have a look at the introduction first of all.

« It has no form and yet it appears.» This sums it up, it's all in that statement. It is the very formlessness that is our problem. St-Augustine once said « It took me years before I realized that reality has no form ». The thing is that our mind, our conscious mind can only deal with forms. And it can only deal with forms because of the way we use words and language. Language, words are the formative influence. Gurdjieff used to talk about what he called 'formative thinking'. And formative thinking is the thinking that most people do which is thinking in words and word associations. It is thinking by associating forms and to some extent also it is finding relationships between forms. And this is looked upon as really the ultimate in thinking.

But nevertheless, we are encouraged to think the unthinkable. And the unthinkable is without form. And so therefore to think the unthinkable we have to put aside our formative thinking, our thinking that can only deal with forms. And it is this thinking that is necessary when we work on « Who Am I » or « What is Mu ». It doesn't matter how brilliant one's mind is at a formative level ; it doesn't help us one iota when it comes to working on « Who Am I » or « What is Mu ». Many people substitute this formative thinking for true work on themselves. The fact that they are able to understand Mu, to see that Mu is everything, to see that Mu cannot be described and so on, because they have these various forms in their mind that are fairly clear, they feel that they have thereby penetrated to the bottom, and they become very conceited. When you asked them a question, there is always a light smile on their face, dismissing it with a wave of the hand or a toss of the head. And this is dead thinking, this is dead practice. It is the practice of the conceited person, and how do you break through that conceit, how do you shatter that form that is blocking that man, that woman so much?

« It has no form and yet it appears. » We've said on another occasion that this word « appears » is an interesting word. You can say, 'Oh it is just appearance, it is not reality. It appears to be like that, but it is not really like that.' In another words, it appears. It has the semblance, it pretends to be. Or we can say, 'She appeared at the door. She manifested at the door.' Then there is this appearance. It appears, it comes into being, it shows itself, it opens itself up. And it is in this way you must understand this 'it appears'. It has no form yet it appears. How does it appear ? It appears as the floor, as the wall, as the cushion. It appears as my voice, it appears as silence. But it also appears to be silence, it also appears to be form. We must be careful.

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It says, « Filling the ten directions » : this is it, everything is it, nothing lies outside it. It's another way of looking at this, « What is there outside us ? » It fills the ten directions. Everything is it. Everything is your true nature. We are not talking about some pantheism here. We are not talking about some spirit which inhabits or pervades all of nature. It is not that way that we must see it. There is no being here that inhabits or

sustains the world. It is in the very emptiness of the ten thousands things that is its main appearance. Again when we think in terms of form, we think in terms of something that endures. We think of something that is specific, it's bounded, it has a boundary, it has limits. And when we say that reality has a form, we don't mean that reality is bounded, has limits, we mean that it is the cushion, the floor, the walls, my voice. It is boundless. Another way of looking at it being boundless is it is impermanent. It is said that that which changes never changes. It is in its ever changingness wherein lies its permanence and its boundlessness. This is its freedom. When I ask, « What is Mu ? », you try to seize it, you try to grasp it, you try to give it a form. Or alternatively you wave your hand indicating it is everything. But it isn't that way. That is looking at it all from outside. And when you look at it from outside in that way, you haven't seen into Mu.

« It responds spontaneously ». This is its genius. This is the impermanence of it. Again this problem, this ambiguity haunts us. Nisargadatta speaks constantly about the immutability. And we say that you are always in the arms of God. We talk about pure being and that gives you the impression of something which endures. But it is not in its enduring quality that we say that you are in the arms of God, but in its reliability. It is utterly reliable. And this is really the basis of our faith. And each one of us has enormous faith, each one of us is fully cognizant of the fundamental, of the utter reliability of reality. Because it is us ; we cannot fall out of reality. We cannot slip away, we cannot be annihilated . There is nothing that can annihilate us. Sometimes the Buddha nature is called the diamond ; it is called the diamond because the diamond can cut all other stones but nothing can cut the diamond. Sometimes it is called a block of iron. And it is in this utter reliability, this is what it is referring to, not its permanence. And it is this spontaneity, responsiveness, wherein lies its impermanence.

Life is a constant creation. It is a moment by moment, instant by instant creation. I don't mean by this that it is a set of discrete creations, it is not like that. But nevertheless, this spontaneity is constantly arising. And it is within this that is our freedom. The problem is that because we have this formative thinking we have built in a way a set of walls around ourselves. And this set of walls is linked together, each form is linked to other forms, each word is tied in with other words. And so therefore one has a continuous structure. And this is enlightened one might say by the light of our true nature. It is a bit like a mist which is lit up by the headlights of car, and because it is lit up in this way, because it reflects back the light, and it reflects it back in terms of meaning, purpose, intelligence, understanding and so on, because it reflects it back in that way, it has the quality of opaqueness about it.

It says, « It arises in emptiness ». Again, this is one of the things that is so difficult for us to work with. But it is in its spontaneity that it is empty, in its impermanence that it is empty. This koan is working directly with this emptiness, and as we have said before, this emptiness is not in terms of an absence. The emptiness that is referred to here is also complete richness, complete aliveness, non abiding aliveness.

« Understanding three when one is raised ». It is the essence of intelligence. That intelligence that we use when we come to solve a problem is like a sparkle, that light

of the mind which lights up our ideas, our thoughts in a meaningful way, this is once more what we take for granted. This magical light. And it is this that gives our life life, it is because of this intelligence that what we refer to as life is life. If I say what is life, you know what I mean but you've never really investigated what you mean when you use the word life. We talk about matter and then we talk about life. What is the difference, have you ever asked this question ? This is very important. We're dealing as I say with this intelligence, we're dealing with this which has no form and yet is appearing. This is something that the modern biologist just cannot grasp, cannot come anywhere near in his laboratory.

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« Detecting the slightest deviation at a glance. » This is total sensitivity, there's a creak and it is registered. There is a bird singing in the distance and it is heard. Nothing is left out. It is this that when one really sees into it, when one sees « detecting the slightest deviation at a glance », one sees into what is called omniscience in Zen. Omniscience isn't knowing everything, it doesn't mean that you know all the encyclopedias in all the libraries and so on. It is that everything is responded to at an equal level. One is open to all that is there. Sometimes you must get this when you are sitting. Very often people report they get it early in the morning, when suddenly everything is clear, every sound passes through, nothing is obstructed, the very air is living.

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And then there is the case. But before we go into the « just sitting there », perhaps we just ought to say something about the basic teaching of Buddha, which is the teaching of suffering. As you know, the first noble truth is « Life is suffering », the second is « the desire is the cause of suffering », the third is that there is a way out of suffering and the fourth is that the way out of suffering is the eightfold path. Buddhism of course has ran into a great deal of criticism on this idea that life is suffering and on the other idea of nirvana. And it is generally looked upon that what the Buddhist wants to do is because life is suffering, he wants to get out of this world as quickly as possible to extinguish himself completely in nirvana, to disappear because of the world weariness. One often gets this when one reads superficial accounts of Buddhism about the world weariness of Buddhism. Buddhism is far from world weariness. Certainly Zen Buddhism is just the opposite of world weariness. And this really is because of people's unwillingness or inability to face the truth that life is basically suffering, that living is painful. And for most of us the fact that people are unable to see this is always something of a surprise, it is so self-evident. One has only to look at the papers, all throughout the world there are wars going on at the moment, one only has to see the accidents that are occurring and so on. But quite apart from that, the other way of looking at this world dukkha, which has been translated as suffering, is to see it as a stress. Life is stressful. Dukkha means two, duality, dichotomy, conflict, and out of that comes stress. It is like being pulled in two opposite directions or being pushed from two different directions ; one's being crushed on one hand or stressed to the limit on the other in terms of stress. So we don't have to look or read the newspaper, we just have to look inside ourselves and we see day by day this stress of living, this stress of being. In the actual sutra it says, « Birth is suffering, old age is suffering, sickness is suffering, death is suffering. Likewise sorrow, grief, lamentation and despair. To be together with things we do not like is suffering, to

be separated from things we do like, that is also suffering. Not to get what one wants that is suffering ; often, getting what one wants is also suffering. In a word, this body, this fivefold mass based upon grasping, that is suffering. »

And really the first step on the spiritual path is to see that life is suffering. And with it goes that concomitant recognition that it is not because of what's happened to me that I suffer, it is because I am alive. And once we do that, then we can let go of all of these reasons, all of these escapes, all of these ways by which we abandon responsibility for our suffering. Once we do that then for the first time it's possible for us to really take charge of our lives. This is really the basis of practice. We are practising because we see that we suffer, because we are human. If it is because of things that have been inflicted to us from outside, because of the way our parents brought us up or because of the way we were taught or whatever, then it will be foolish to sit in zazen. One would have to deal with it some other way.

Then he goes on and says, « The cause of our suffering is that craving which gives rise to fresh rebirth ». This craving. When we sit, particularly in sesshin, this craving becomes very evident. It comes very evident in terms of a kind of tension, of a kind of dryness, a restlessness, a looking forward to the end of the sesshin, a wanting to get away from the sesshin. We crave experiences, we crave sensations, we crave movement ; and when we are sitting facing the wall, there is no sensation, when you are not allowed to move even, there is no movement. And so therefore the mind rebels, the whole orientation is towards satisfying this craving.

He says, « It gives rise to fresh rebirth ». Well, that might be rebirth in terms of a new body, but it means constantly undertaking new enterprises, new things, going to new places and so on. This constant restlessness of living. « And bound by greed for pleasure, now here now there, finds ever fresh delight. It is sensual craving. » But then he says, « it is the craving for individual existence ». And to me this is always the more important aspect. It is this craving to exist, it is the craving to be, and ultimately this craving to be leads to the craving to be unique, to be the one, to be special.

But then, and this is what the critics of Buddhism so often overlook, he also teaches the end of suffering. And he says, « It is the utter passionless cessation of, the giving up, the forsaking, the release from, the absence of longing for this craving. » It is this craving to go beyond this craving. This is really what our practice is about. This person when we first came across the idea of Buddhism and the spiritual way and were told we have to give up our desires found this was really not for me, this was not the way we want to go. Desires seemed at the time the very substance of living, it made life rich, meaningful and worthwhile. And particularly when it was told by the Hindu religion which in the way of all human endeavour seems to have taken things to extremes. And the thing is, obviously it is not to deny desire, it is not to suppress desire, it is not even to suppress this craving, but it is to see into that element of « I » which resides in it, to see, to root out the poison in the desire which is really what is at issue. And this, as we said, is the desire for existence, the desire to be unique, the desire to be the one. This seems to this person to be the essence, this is the root. First of all, we must acknowledge that it

is there, we must acknowledge that the whole world should revolve around me, and that doesn't mean to say necessarily my physical body. Me is what I have invested this sense of « I am unique » in. It could be another person indeed, or it could be my family or it could be and it often is my country, or it is the ideology to which I adhere or my religion, or whatever it might be, my Fuhrer. Anything that we invest this sense of « I » in, it is what we are talking about, this sense of being unique, being special, being above it all, it is this craving that is the root. We must see how this manifests in our life. This is one of the things that if we are aware during the day, we'll be able to recognize when it comes up, these moments of arrogance, of bombast, conceit, but it is also the moments of humiliation, and when one is ashamed in the face of others and so on. All kinds of signals which constantly are pointing to this one factor. That section we read from Hubert Benoit yesterday is so important. Because as he pointed it out, once we have let go of that need to be unique, we can never be humiliated again, we can never be hurt. And it is pointless blaming the world because we have been hurt. This above all we must give up. The world is not responsible for my pain.

And then there is the Noble Path which is right view, right aim, right speech, right action, right living, right effort, right mindfulness and right contemplation. But in Zen, all of that is based on zazen. And the fundamental aspect of zazen is to see into one's true nature. And to see into one's true nature, then this false nature, this false sense of I with all of its sense of uniqueness, with all that it implies also drops away.

So now let's have a look at the koan itself. A non-buddhist once asked the World-Honored One, « I do not ask for words nor do I ask for no words. » So what the non-Buddhist is really saying is : Don't give me any kind of explanation, don't give me any kind of talk, don't give me any kind of theory or ideology. But at the same time, don't just sit there and be silent. And really obviously what this is doing is it is pushing Buddha into the ultimate ambiguity. And when you come into the dokusan room, this is really the dilemma that you're always coming into. It's no good giving explanations, but it is no good just sitting there either. So what are you going to do ?

And it says, « Buddha just sat ». What is that « just sitting » ? On the face of it, it would seem to be silence. But the non-Buddhist said, « Don't give me silence ». So if it isn't silence, what is it ? How are you going to enter into this « Buddha just sat » ? As you know, the highest form of Zen practice is called shikantaza. And shikantaza is « just sitting ». When you are asking « What is Mu » you are asking what is that « just sitting ». Just in the same way if you are working on « Who am I » or « What is the sound of one hand clapping ». What does it mean « Buddha just sat » ? If you see into your true nature, you must see into « Buddha just sat ». We've said repeatedly that inanimate things preach the Dharma. And we've said that inanimate things preach the Dharma much better than Buddha, the patriarchs or any of the Zen masters. Why is that ? What is it that inanimate things teach ? How are you going to arrive at this ? Many people think that the only way which they can arrive at it is by suppressing their thoughts. But this won't do. It isn't an empty, dead mind that is going to reveal this. But what is it then ?

There is a comment on this :« The eyes of Shakyamuni penetrate the three worlds. » The three worlds are the world of desire, form and no-form. « The eyes penetrate the three worlds ». In other words, one goes beyond the world of form, no-form and desire. What is there beyond those three worlds ? He says, « The sight of the non-Buddhist extends to the five heavens. » The five heavens : this is complete, expansive, boundless. Now what has this to do with Buddha just sitting ? The sight of the non-Buddhist is boundless. Buddha just sat. Then it says, « Tender is the heart of the flower. The peach blossoms smile. The light of spring rests not on the willow leaves only. » There is a very famous haiku which points in the direction that one must go when Buddha just sat there. And it is :

The old pond.
The frog jumps in.
Ploc !

How are you going to get to this central secret of Buddhism ? A secret which is wide open. It is as open as the five heavens, but it lies beyond the three worlds. This is the direction that your questioning « Who am I ? » must take. We've said that you must think the unthinkable. And Buddha just sitting there is unthinkable. This is why we say that the inanimate things preach the Dharma. There is no thought involved in this, there is no form that you can grasp ; on the contrary, it is cutting through all forms. And then it says, « The non-Buddhist came to great awakening ». Now why did the non-Buddhist come to great awakening ? What happened there ? There is the non-Buddhist asking this question and there is the Buddha just sitting there. And then it says, « The non-Buddhist came to awakening ». What happened there ? You see, you too are just sitting there right now. You too are Buddha. Or we can say you too are the non-Buddhist questioning. You don't have to go outside yourself to see into the non-Buddhist coming to awakening. You must see yourself as Buddha just sitting there. You too have to just sit there. How are you going to do that ?

During the workshop we always point out, « There is nothing that needs to be done ». How are you going to get through to this « nothing that needs to be done », when getting through to it seems to imply a doing. Dogen came to awakening when his teacher said to him, « You must drop body and mind ». To see into this, to hear inanimate things preaching the Dharma, to see into Mu, to see into Who, you must drop body and mind. Don't say it is impossible. It is not impossible. What is really in its way impossible is this constant need to hold up body and mind, to be attached to it, to grasp it, this is the hard work, this is the impossibility, this is the complexity and the difficulty. There is no grasping in « Buddha just sitting there ». It is the end of craving. To see into this is to see into the end of craving. As long as you've got some agenda, something that is going to be your acceptability, this is the way that you're going to accept awakening, if it gives you this and this and this, you've got a list there that you're going to check off, and as long as you've got that list, as long as you've got this quality of craving, you're not going to be able to see into this « Buddha just sat there ». Again we're not saying that you have to give up your desires or whatever, but you must go beyond that need to grasp something, to be something, this is all that you have to do.

When you're working on « Who am I » this is what you're being called to do. One has to know the unknowable. This is what we are talking about. Buddha just sitting there is not knowable. You cannot know it. It's like the sound of One hand. You cannot know the silence of One hand. It is unknowable. You've got to know the unknowable.

And then Ananda asked Buddha, « What realization did the non-Buddhist have that made him praise you like that ? » The World-Honored One said, « He is like a high-mettled horse which starts even at the shadow of the whip. » Now this « starting at the shadow of a whip », it means that one's mind is capable of the most subtle discernment. This is what « starting at the shadow of a whip » is.

First of all, of course, we have to break through this constant stream of thoughts, of mind and so on. We have to get beyond the pain and what have you. But don't look upon this struggle with the constant stream of mind, and thoughts, and pain and so on, as being a burden or an obstacle to the practice. It isn't. It is in the struggle with that that the mind is honed, is sharpened, is made more acute, more precise. We said to you many times that many religions use pain to hone the mind in that way, to make it sharp, to have that concentration power. And so if one puts up a real struggle with this wandering mind, this moving mind, then it is like you are sharpening the knife on a whetstone, it is becoming more able to do this subtle kind of discernment that we are talking about. And then there are these moments, these short periods when one breaks through for no apparent reason into an area of clarity. And this is where one has to then use the mind in this scalpel like way. This is where one starts thinking the unthinkable or knowing the unknowable or dropping body and mind. This is where you can penetrate into « Buddha just sitting ». It is these times, as I said they don't last very long as a rule, but they are the times when this kind of subtle analysis, this work is possible. One must not look upon it as, 'Well I wish I could do it but I can't because I have all this other stuff going on in my mind...' It's all one practice.

The verse of Mumon is interesting. He says :

He walks along the edge of the sword
And runs over the sharp ridges of an ice floe.

« He walks along the edge of the sword ». This is this razor's edge. This is this fine line, this fine balance, this is this discerning mind and this is what one must bring to bear on our koan.

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« And runs over the sharp ridges of an ice floe ». This is the courage that it takes, the willingness to go on that it takes. This practice is a hard practice, let's make no mistake. But we need the courage to do it, the courage to go on.

And then he says, « You need take no steps. »

This is where we must keep coming back to. To know the teaching of the inanimate things you need to take no steps. To see into Mu or Who you need to take no step, nothing needs to be done. Of course, this is not to say you can do nothing. And then he says, « Let go your hold on the cliff. »

