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Opening with a Question: the Zen Koan

There's a goose in a bottle. The bottle can't be broken and its opening is too small for a goose to fit through. Get the goose out without killing it.

At the bottom of the sea, ten thousand feet down, lies a single rock. Pick it up without getting wet.

On a narrow mountain road with ninety-nine sharp bends, go straight.

Count the stars in the sky.

Far across the valley, clear in the evening stillness, a temple bell is ringing. From where you're sitting, stop the sound.

Koans. 'Public cases,' the word means. Traditional assignments given to students in certain teaching lines of Zen Buddhism. As you can hear, the assignments are fundamentally questions, asking to be understood and answered. But they're not just hard to understand, they're impossible. In fact you can tell from the shape of them that they're pointedly, *deliberately* impossible. Why?

Now would be the time to explain what Zen is, showing how its sense of the world gives a place to koan-provocations like these. But only someone who knew something about Zen could explain it and we don't have anyone like that speaking tonight. Still, there's no need to feel deprived. Already the koans are suggesting that Zen goes where things are impossible to understand. There, *no* one knows anything. In fact trying to get hold of Zen by knowing about it might well send a fox to

count the chickens.

* * *

The koans.

Listening to them, what do you hear? Get a goose out of a bottle you can't get it out of. Go straight where there's no room to go straight. Count stars that are too many to count. You can't. You can't do any of these things because they don't let you. They make you fail. In the face of a koan, you fail.

Yet there are more koans than one, many more. It looks as though students actually succeed in solving the case they're given and go on to yet others.

When you meet a person of wisdom on the road, you can't speak, you can't remain silent. What do you do?

A woman named Ch'ien in a Chinese folktale wants to marry a man her parents like well enough, but not as a son-in-law. She runs away to marry him and they travel on his boat to a distant land. Years pass. Ch'ien decides she wants to see her parents again, so she and her husband make the long trip back. As proper, according to custom, her husband goes first to the family house to announce their arrival. The parents greet him joyfully. "We wondered what happened to you when you disappeared all those years ago."

"I'm glad you're not angry I went off with your daughter," he says. They look at him, startled. "But Ch'ien is here. In the house. She's been here sick all the years since you left." They take him to an inner room and there, smiling at him from the bed, is ... another Ch'ien.

One Ch'ien leaves home to begin a life of her own. One Ch'ien stays home with the parents who gave her the life she has. Which is the real Ch'ien?

Two Ch'iens, both there. No way to choose between them. You'd

like to decide but you find yourself silenced. Silence means you haven't answered the question you've been asked. You haven't done your job. You can't speak, you can't remain silent. What do you do?

* * *

Koans make us fail and they don't let us choose. But if we can't do anything and we can't make choices, what's left? We're most ourselves when we do things and choose, aren't we? If koans take that away from us, they dismantle our very nature. Why would they want to do that?

Come back to the story of Ch'ien. She has two forms. Each form is herself. Don't we take forms too? We act one way, then another. We choose between alternatives each of which we could enter into. We're free to take on these different forms. Yet of all the forms we freely take on, which one is really us?

I might think I'm none of them. Rather I'm the freedom to take any form I want. But accepting that chameleon-like mobility, I've identified something about myself. I've accepted a profile identifiably distinct from other profiles. Once again I've entered a form. Now of all the forms I enter, which one am I really?

What am I? *Where* am I?

* * *

In twelfth-century China Zen teacher Yuanwu collected many koans in his well-known *Blue Cliff Record*. But one he never collected was the one that opened the way to himself. It was part of an old song that went, "Over and over she called out to her maid—not because anything was wrong, but so her lover could hear the sound of her voice."[1]

Nothing is wrong, yet she cries out over and over. And the lover hearing her voice—hears what, exactly? Nothing the woman is saying. She's not saying anything. But for this one who loves her, she's there.

Where?

And who *is* this lover who never appears?

* * *

Southern California. An evening not long ago. A woman is driving home after dark. The car radio is on, playing an ad for television reruns of the evening soap *Dynasty*. In the ad a woman's voice is saying, "If I can't have him, Jessica, no one can," then *blam, blam*!—gunshots. Suddenly the Santa Monica Freeway is a river of light and the woman in the car, for the first time, *sees*.

Sees what? What is there to see?

Massachusetts a few years ago. A friend of mine, a graduate student in environmental science at Harvard, asks a woman in the department office out on a picnic. I wish you knew my friend; you'd like him so much—the way he's so utterly serious and at the same time utterly able to smile at himself. His smile makes me imagine the story this way. There they are, the two of them, on the grass by the edge of the Charles. My friend is explaining his scientific work—what this piece of it is, and that piece. What this fact is, and that fact. What this is, what that is. When he finally pauses for breath, the woman points to the apple by his backpack and says, "What's that?"

What's *that*? —This woman knows what an apple looks like. She knows he knows. So what's she asking? What kind of answer does she want?

Before, koans gave alternatives none of which were possible. But this koan gives no alternatives at all. There's nothing to deal with, nothing to do. There's no question here. Nothing to respond to.

If I can't have him, Jessica, no one can. *Blam, blam!*—nothing there to have.

What's that?—pointing to an apple. No insight for anyone to grasp.

What in the world are these two women teaching if they don't give us anything to take hold of and learn?

* * *

A teacher once asked a student, "What's the true meaning of awakened truth?" The student said, "When clouds do not appear above the mountain peaks, the moon reflects in the heart of the waves."

"Are you going to keep saying that till your hair turns white?" the teacher said scornfully. "All right, now ask me."

"What's the true meaning of awakened truth?"

"When clouds do not appear above the mountain peaks, the moon reflects in the heart of the waves."[2]

How can the same answer be first wrong, then right? Truth here evidently doesn't lie in the form of the answer. Right has the same form as wrong. So is there something beyond the form? Inside it somehow? As though when the teacher says it, it's right?

But isn't it what we say that counts? What we *do*, not the person doing it? How can an answer be right just because the teacher gives it? What, exactly, is this teacher teaching when he says back to the student exactly the words the student has just said to him?

Another teacher used to say words to himself. Every day he'd call out, "Master!" and he'd answer, "Yes." Then he'd say, "Be aware," and he'd reply, "Yes." "Don't be deceived by others." "No, I won't."[3]

Every day he'd do this, one face of himself calling, another face answering. A master, an advisor reminding the master. A person not awake, a person alertly reminding.

But it's the same teacher, his voice calling, his voice answering. Does he have no memory? Surely by now he's absorbed the lesson. But he doesn't stop. Over and over he calls out, then answers—himself calling, himself answering.

The woman in the old song called out to her maid over and over, though there was nothing wrong. The wrong thing doesn't matter. There isn't anything wrong. There's only the lover who's listening.

Is there a place in us where lessons need to be right but where their mere rightness doesn't end the matter? Where we're not simply the achievements we've chalked up or the store of experience they've given us? In that place might mere wrongness not decide anything either? Even in the midst of hurt and loss and fear—towering and terrible—might there be a way that even then, nothing's the matter? Where there's only a calling out and a listening that cares about us and takes us in?

Such peace we'd find in a place like that. Such rest, all commotion stilled. A stillness beyond trouble, beyond any feeling that we're somehow wrong, somehow insufficient, and that we need to make ourselves better.

Is there anywhere such peace?

* * *

A story from China offers its voice.

The teacher of a monastery, feeling himself near the end of his life, picked as his successor an illiterate young lay brother. He sent for the young man by night and passed to him the ceremonial robe and bowl signifying the title of teacher. Then he rowed the young man across the river and told him to go away and hide. The monks would be furious when they found out who'd been chosen. The young man stepped onto the other shore and made his way off through the mountains.

Next day, when the monks heard what had happened, they started after him to get the robe and bowl back. One monk, a former army man wise in combat, was shrewder than the others. He figured out the path the lay brother had taken and caught up to him on the side of a mountain.

The lay brother, Hui Neng by name, set the robe and bowl down on a rock. "There shouldn't be fighting over these," he said to the soldier monk. "Take them."

The monk tried to pick them up but it was like trying to lift the mountain. He couldn't move them. Suddenly realizing there was more here than he understood, he said, "Teach me, lay brother."

Hui Neng said, "Give no thought to what's right or what's wrong. Now right at this moment, what's your original face?"[4]

The monk knew it was wrong for an ignorant country boy to be carrying away the title of teacher. He was chasing Hui Neng through the mountains to correct that wrong. Wilderness and distance didn't confuse this monk. He knew the trail he had to follow. He knew where to find the tokens of truth—the robe, the bowl—and he knew where they rightfully belonged.

So why couldn't he pick them up?

Hui Neng hadn't decided where they rightfully belonged. He'd merely accepted what he'd been given and gone where he'd been sent. Now, asked to teach, he says, "What's your original face?"

Our face is what we look like. It's how people recognize us. Talking to us, they look us in the face. We smile with our face, and frown. Our face wrinkles with our confusion, creases with our concentration. We inhabit our face.

A face wears many expressions and each can be recognized. Each is different from the others. But the face wearing them all is itself no expression. It's inside all expressions, underneath them. Out of it they come, like waves out of water, and into it they return. From it each new expression originates. The face is original.

But Hui Neng is aware that everything in this world we're involved in *appears*, just the way expressions appear on a face. He asks for the face all those appearances appear *on*, the face there at their origin. That face is there before each of them, before even the individual appearance we see when we look in the mirror. Hui Neng asks for our face before we were born. Before our parents were born. Before any of the events appeared which make up the world we live in. Hui Neng is asking us to go where we're original. He's pointing us at our original home, the stillness of water before all waves.

How do we know where that is? Hui Neng seems to know. He could just tell us. But he doesn't. Instead, he hides. He hides just as he was told to hide, disappearing inside the vast question he asks. In that darkness before anything appears, how do we find him? How do we see which way he's pointing?

* * *

The voice of the story continues, now in India. Teacher has passed robe and bowl to teacher. The line is long. But we return now to the darkness of the beginning. Here the first teacher, the original teacher, sits under a tree. It's night still but in this moment he looks up and sees above him the star of morning. At this instant he awakens to the truth and becomes the one now awake. In Sanskrit, the Buddha.

As we listen, we hear him say, "I, and the great earth and beings, simultaneously achieve the Way."[5]

In this original moment of seeing, the whole earth of beings sees too. Everyone. Everything. But how? How does his single act include the whole rest of the earth? Surely he's alone under his tree. Surely his insight is his alone. He's the one people single out, and name, and revere for the wisdom he has passed on to the others who've followed him.

Except that *he* doesn't single himself out. He includes in his seeing, the whole earth and everything in it. Simultaneously, he says. No separation by time. What kind of seeing has that much room in it? Room for joy and hurt. For China and India. For earlier and later. It's the oddest of spaces, in which it doesn't *matter* whether there's joy or hurt, China or India, then or now. They're all here, all the same. Differences of feeling, of geographical place, of moments in time aren't important. Nothing's wrong with any of them.

Now is as good as then. Now and then aren't different. The Buddha is saying *right now* what he said. He's including us in his seeing. At this very moment, in this room, we're achieving the Way with him.

How?

How do we see so originally? What do we see when we do?

* * *

The voice of the story is speaking again, once more in China.

Zen teacher Chao-chou sits in his monastery hall. A student monk stands before him. This monk knows what the Buddha has said. The great earth and beings, the Buddha has said. All of them achieving the Way of awakened truth and possessing the nature of that truth. All of them. But the monk is wavering. He sees differences in different beings. Some beings seem more aware than others. Here in front of him is the famed teacher Chao-chou, whose every gesture is alight with a certainty the student can't find in himself. Next to Chao-chou he feels as banished from insight as a dog from the meditation hall.

"Does a dog have the awakened nature, or not?" he asks.

"Not," Chao-chou says without a flicker of hesitation.[6] 'Wu,' in Chinese. 'Mu' as it will be later pronounced—or mispronounced—in Japan.

But Chao-chou's original teacher said all beings have the nature of awakening. Dogs, students, everybody. So what does Chao-chou mean? Is he not part of that beginning moment where all beings are together, their differences not mattering? Why would he want to separate himself? Chao-chou's 'not,' his 'Mu' revives the night. It threatens to put out the morning star. Once more we have no idea where we are. This 'Mu' cuts us off from the Buddha's primal teaching.

Still, Chao-chou is a teacher. He's teaching as he answers the student's question with his devastating 'Mu.' The student wants assurance that the Buddha's teaching is right but Chao-chou won't give it to him. Chao-chou in fact wipes the teaching away and leaves the student with nothing. Does that mean Chao-chou teaches something else? Is he in conflict with the first teaching, at war with his own beginning?

It looks like it. 'No' surely fights with 'yes.' What clearer war could there be? So teacher battles teacher. There's discord, and deeper doubt, because an ignorant student has no way of knowing which teacher to trust. What can anyone trust if there's war between separate alternatives?

But are we sure the teachings conflict? They do seem to. 'Yes' seems as opposite to 'no' as a smile to a frown.

Yet that face beneath all expressions? The original face? The teacher who saw the morning star was original, like the face. A teaching that's original can't conflict with another teaching. A face can't conflict with a smile or a frown. Does Chao-chou's 'not' somehow help the original teaching stay original?

What was the *original* part of that first seeing which took voice as the Buddha spoke? It was a strong speech, a merciful speech—'I and all beings,' the Buddha said. 'All of us achieve the way together.' How might a speech like that remain *before* each expression the face of our world can take on? If the speech appears anywhere—in memory, say—it's an appearance, even if a strong and merciful and memorable one.

An appearance isn't original. But what is?

When the student asked Chao-chou about the appearance the student remembered, Chao-chou responded. That other teacher who quoted his student's error back to him—he responded too. He presented to the student the answer the student ought to have given. And it was the *same* answer. The same appearance. The teacher himself, right there with the student, gave the student not an appearance but a voice. He stood there himself, right at that moment, and said something whose wrongness didn't matter. There wasn't anything wrong. Nothing was the matter. Only the teacher himself mattered. Right there with the student. Right then.

And the teacher who called to himself every day. Good words he called, but their goodness wasn't the teacher himself, right there calling, right there answering. At that very moment giving the words—voice.

What is this voice? What is this self that seems so vital? How does Chao-chou keep it alive as the original teaching, the original teacher? 'Mu,' Chao-chou says. 'Not.' Saying it right there to the student's face. Right at that moment. Without one flicker of hesitation.

Quick, unexpected, Chao-chou's 'Mu' cancels memory. It cancels quoting and knowing and dependence on what someone else has said. It wipes clean.

Voice, self—how are these present in Chao-chou's wiping away? And what makes them original? How are they *before* all appearances? How do they achieve that peace beneath all waves, that abiding stillness that is our original home?

* * *

Japan. The eighteenth century. The room of Zen teacher Hakuin, who is writing a letter. The teacher's sure brush moves steadily across the delicate paper, telling of his way with students:

> Some I have made to question their "self," some I have required to study the Mu koan. I have used a variety of expedients, including teaching with admonitions and instructions....
>
> Five or six years ago I made up my mind to instruct everyone by saying, "Listen to the Sound of the Single Hand." .... What is the Sound of the Single Hand? When you clap together both hands a sharp sound is heard; when you raise the one hand there is ... [no] sound. .... This is something that can by no means be heard with the ear. If conceptions and discriminations are not mixed within it and it is quite apart from seeing, hearing, perceiving, and knowing, and if, while walking, standing, sitting, and lying down, you proceed straightforwardly without interruption in the study of this koan, then in the place where reason is exhausted and words are ended, you will suddenly pluck out the ... root of birth and death and break down the cave of ignorance. .... At this time the basis of mind, consciousness, and emotion is suddenly shattered; the realm of illusion with its endless sinking in the cycle of birth and death is overturned.[7]

Clap two hands, there's a sound. Raise one hand, there's no sound. Why would Hakuin tell his students to listen where there's no sound to hear? No voice. Nothing. If Chao-chou's 'Mu' wiped clean, this wipes cleaner. At least Chao-chou said a word. He gave voice. He gave the student an answer the student could hear. At least the student could tell there was a teacher there talking to him. But this hand gives no signal at all.

So how does it teach? How does it lead to that peace beyond understanding where we're most truly at home?

* * *

The voice of the story resumes again right here in this room, speaking with common sense and the irritation of a patience pushed too far.

This is too much, the voice says. You've told us about Hui Neng and some original face that's supposed to be our home before the beginning of the world. You've told us about somebody looking up at a star, saying he and everything else in the world achieve enlightenment at the same instant. That instant, you've told us, is simultaneous with all instants. It's going on now, you said, and everybody's in it, and all teachers are the same, and wrong is right, and outside is inside, and down is up, and it's too much. It really is. You've got to stop being insane. Romantic wistfulness about far-off eastern teachings is one thing; real fact is another. The real fact is, we're nothing like what you've been saying.

Our home before the beginning of the world? That is so ridiculous I can't even talk about it. Before the beginning of the world we didn't exist. There wasn't anyone there. Each of us exists *in* the world. We had parents. We have a life that runs a course. Our life has circumstances in it, and events. One event leads to another. We had families we grew up in; we had friends. Our family and friends had an impact on us, making us who we are. We have attitudes, values shaped by the influences we had growing up.

All moments are in the original moment, you told us? Ours and Hui Neng's too? So you're telling me he's right here in the room with us, listening? I can talk to him?

All right, Hui Neng, pardon my English but let me put this right in your original face—we're *histories*, okay, Hui Neng? A person's life goes from one thing to the next. Influences steer it. Events shape other events. It's the way our world works.

Our world is *not* original. One thing gives rise to another; there are causes and the effects they bring about. Nothing happens without a reason.

What happens has form to it. It can be recognized. We can distinguish one thing from another. We have values and tastes and we discriminate. We choose between alternatives. We move toward what looks right for us and away from what looks wrong. We decide. We're causes too. We determine what we do. The determining gets ambiguous, of course. We move toward what looks good to us but only when we're held back do we notice the push of our own momentum. 'Desiring,' we call it then. When we're conscious of desiring, we have the sense we're free to choose. We seem totally in charge. But that attractive item we're steering toward is what gets us to move. At that moment we don't feel complete without it. We depend on it then—just the way an effect depends on its cause. So things determine us too.

We live with outer things and their connections. We need that environment. It makes us up. It teaches us what to do. Teachings help us, but only if we *have* them. You who've been teaching us with this lecture, you no sooner had Hui Neng lead us to the Buddha then you wiped the Buddha's teaching away with Chao-chou's word 'Mu.' Now you offer us Hakuin's single hand that has no voice to teach with, and suggest it somehow teaches *anyway*?

You think Chao-chou wiped something away? I'll wipe something away for you. This whole Zen business is a total joke. It's not real. But our life is. Real things happen to us and we better pay attention. It's not easy being alive.

If you want to survive, you have to do things. You can't sit around and fail. Our parents taught us that. 'Don't fail,' they said with every expectation. In school we learned not to fail. 'Satisfactory,' our report cards said. Or, 'Needs improvement.' Later we got A's if we worked hard, F's if we didn't. Everywhere we have to measure up or people won't accept us. They don't like failures either. We can lose our friends, our jobs.

We've got problems on all sides. Our cars can break down. Our bodies can break down. Everything imaginable can go wrong and sooner or later usually does. It's this 'later' we constantly have to deal with. We comfort ourselves with plans and goals, targets we aim ourselves at like arrows. Even if we never actually hit the targets, just being *aimed* gives us the feeling we're safely on the way to what's right for us and away from what's wrong. We make choices. We calculate. We don't lie down helpless before this future camped on our border like a hostile army. We're at war with the future and it never lets up. It's tireless. It's inventive. It's a *very* good enemy.

The pressure to look after ourselves makes us tense, tired. The problems are inside too, not just outside. We bear up against them all. We have our moments of triumph. But those moments, though wonderful when they come, are only temporary victories. They don't end the war.

What we'd like is help with our problems, not fantasies about some hidden realm of stillness we can't see. We see our lives and our lives run according to the currents of causing that make us dependent. We're prisoners of all the influences that contain us and shape us. It's a real imprisonment too, let me tell you, not some childish puzzle-game about a goose in a bottle, where the rule is you can't break the bottle. Our bottle really *is* unbreakable. Knotted places in our parents caused them to kink us when we were little, just as they were kinked by their parents when *they* were little. We pass these kinks on to our children, and they to their children, forever—the same wave-disturbance rolling on through different packets of water.

That's looking back. But we can look ahead too toward goals we pick out for ourselves. Whatever we choose, or seem to choose, has consequences we're vulnerable to. The circumstances resulting from our choices can make us or break us. So the future hems us in too. We're squeezed tight on both sides. But just try to break *this* bottle of causation. You'd have to *cause* it to break. You'd have to make both the bottle

and yourself vulnerable all over again, this time to the desirable goal that's getting you to raise your hammer.

No, we're stuck inside our bottle and we can't get out and it's fatigue here and anger and anxiety and hurt, and it's help we need, not fancy talk.

We'd like to stop all the trouble, and just rest. Find finally some healing peace, so we could stop working so hard to defend ourselves in these little bunkers we call our 'lives.'

I'm sorry to rant on like this. I know you're only trying to introduce us to these eastern koans. I know you don't mean any harm. Frankly I have no idea what got me going. I think it might have been all the talk about stillness—that deep quiet you suggested we could escape into and be safe. You made me mad, I think. You didn't seem to be taking us seriously as we really are. You acted like we could just leave our problems and withdraw into some comfortable inner place like a monastery, where all people do is meditate, tend the garden, and listen to lovely bells across the valley.

That kind of talk denies we even *have* problems. It closes its eyes to what we see across *our* valley here in Santa Fe, namely the lights of workers busy at the bombs that can blow us all to bright radioactive smithereens. Our globe is warming. Toxic chemicals are poisoning our air, our water, our food. We face crime and corporate brutality and dizzying abysses of faith-fired political hate. Children gun down other children in the halls of our schools.

At home we're strung tight with the tensions families have that don't know how to function. We need the people close to us; they give us support we can't do without. But when we depend on them that way, we demand that they be there for us the way we *need* them, not the way they actually are. We pressure them to be something they're not and it causes conflict. They do the same to us, so there's more conflict. To avoid open war, we often have to suppress parts of our personalities and that's hard to do. Sometimes too hard.

Why is it so hard? Why is a personality so important? Why do I need this distinctive handwriting I write my life in, this thing other people know when they know *me*? Is it because without it, I can't do anything? My personality seems to be what I act from. It's my style of responding, of making choices, of coping—as individual and recognizable as a painter's style.

As a style of coping, is this 'personality' of mine what makes sure everything goes well for me, not badly? Is it at bottom a method of handling problems? Is it nothing more than a skill I've evolved over the years to help me survive in every situation, a skill I've *become*? If so, it's once more where I'm dependent, where I'm vulnerable to consequences. It's causation again, now as tight around me as my own skin. And I can't get outside my own skin. I can't.

Why am I going on like this? It must be something in all your Zen talking, something that sounds so vast it's getting me to look at my life in a bigger way than I usually do. Usually I'm happy just getting through my week. I have my fun places and flat places, my little successes and setbacks, and then I move on. I don't sit down and look at the full picture. Especially I don't get so *negative*. Why am I being so negative? It's not like me to see life this way as suffering. But right now suffering's the way it looks.

What we do in our life seems driven by the pain that problems bring—the bigger problems but also the tinier ones closer to us, those twinges of boredom, loneliness, uncertainty, nervousness, humiliation. The instant we begin to suffer, we drive back the invading pain by putting something in its place. We look out the window, have a cup of tea, get together with a friend, do some work. We *do* something. We don't let the pain win out. *We* win out and if we can't win, we evade or escape. What we don't do is lose. Ever. If we lose, we'll die—in a final big way or one of those million intimate smaller ways. So we have to make things work out right for us. We have to stay capable of causing the effects we need. Capability is our core. Our capabilities are our only defense against disaster.

Defense is everything. Why do people make bombs?—they think they have to defend themselves. It's the reason people get angry and blow up at each other. At bottom we're all threatened, we're all at war. Everywhere. Everywhere there's fear and a need to affirm ourselves by striking back. We feel exposed, and that's because we *are* exposed. Menacing consequences circle us like warplanes. It's no good thinking you can hide out in some Zen monastery. The consequences will hunt you down there too. The web of dependence is everywhere. You can't evade it.

There's one of your Eastern words for this. 'Karma,' dharma'?--I never know the difference. But the point is, you can dodge all you want to and build all the bomb shelters you've got strength to build but you can't fix things. You can't solve the problem of dependence once and for all because it's too big. You can't get a handle on it and you can't get out of it. In fact wanting to get out is just one more way you're dependent.

There's nothing we can do. Not really. Not finally. I know I said we're not allowed to fail but right now I don't see what else we can do. Any real solution for us is as impossible as your koans. Given the full scope of what I'm up against in my life, I'm ignorant and I'm helpless. I see I am. This problem hanging over us all is as clear to me as the morning star.

I don't know what to do now. There doesn't seem to be anything *to* do. All the trying seems pointless. The endless thinking and talking. I should stop.

* * *

The voice is quiet now. All the voices we've heard are quiet. There's only this place where the koans have led. Koans have brought us here, either by intriguing or infuriating us, saying nothing we could understand, offering nothing we could depend on. Now where there's no

voice left, we're closer than ever to that voiceless last koan, the single hand.

In its palm the hand holds all the koans. Every one of them has taught us to fail and failing is what the single hand does best, unable even to cause a sound. So what does the hand tell us about our failure to hear and understand? Making us as unable as it is, where does it put us? Somewhere in the sequence of our lives? Nowhere?

Do we know where we are now? Can we say?

Maybe we feel ourselves becoming as silent as all the voices that have spoken tonight. Maybe we're even tempted to linger in the silence, entering it more deeply. If we do linger, if we join the silence rather than fighting it, we might find the clamor of all our capabilities dying away. As their boundaries—*our* boundaries—begin to relax, we might find we're opening to let in the silence of the single hand, its inability and ours melting into each other.

In this place of stillness, where we've let go all ability to cause anything, might we realize we're hearing a sound unable to be caused? A sound that's the hand's sound, and ours? And *us*? Do we *know* there's no room for this? Do we know?

It's calling, the hand is. Calling to us right now, from the heart of this *now* we float in.

Notice it, this present moment when something is calling. Be aware of the *now-ness* of the moment, or maybe awareness and *now-ness* are the same thing. There's no end to this *now*, is there?—no beginning, or rather it *is* the beginning. Nothing comes before it; into it comes everything. Sense the way the hand inhabits this *now*. The hand is nowhere else. Just here. Calling.

It calls to us, asking us to answer. It invites us into the *now* we too inhabit each time we hear a call, and then respond. We respond here, nowhere else. We answer, that's all. Someone calls our name and we just answer. We give the caller ... ourselves.

It's us the single hand is calling for. It's a call, not a problem to solve. Its calling may even offer our so-called 'problems' a different

sound. A 'problem' for us is a puzzle piece painful because it doesn't fit in our life. It makes us look for other pieces that.can lock it in place and let it disappear so all we see is the Bavarian castle on the cover of the puzzle box. The pieces themselves hold each other together then. We don't have to do a thing.

But the pieces of our lives don't *go* together. Not neatly. Not so they stay. Every time we find ourselves in pieces, each piece of us needs other pieces we don't have and that dependence links us to them. Though not with us, they seem somehow ours, somehow delayed on the way to us. It's not just that they're not here but that they're not here *yet.* Our dependence creates a sense of future. When a piece of ourselves, on the other hand, *has* the other pieces it needs, it depends on them to hold it in position. From its point of view these other pieces seem more secure, more established. They seem to have been in place first. They seem, as we say, 'earlier.' Here arises a sense of past. Balancing between past and future—tipping now toward memory, now toward anticipation—teeters the precarious little wafer we experience as the 'present.'

See how our dependence takes form as time itself? See how our dependence, by sealing us inside time, makes us in little ways and big ways perpetually needy, perpetually unsatisfied and on edge? See the trouble our dependence makes?

But the single hand doesn't ask for trouble. It suggests that a difficulty which gets your attention might merely be calling to you—calling to the whole of you that's so much more than any piece or group of pieces, the room for awareness that opens so much wider. The difficulty might be asking you to be there entirely, doing what you hear yourself called to do. Doing what's called for, whether it finally solves anything or not. Nothing more—but also nothing less.

And the hand itself? What exactly does *it* call for? What in us is it calling *to* that can open entirely enough to respond?

What do we hear when we listen to this koan that is all koans? Never before have we heard anything that has no sound. No precedent, nothing in our knowledge, guarantees that the sound of the single hand

will ever be heard. So where do we have to be, each of us, in order to hear it?

Where are we, each of us, right now?

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[1] See J.C. Cleary and Thomas Cleary, trans., *Zen Letters: Teachings of Yuanwu* (Boston, 1994), p. 16.
[2] See Arthur Braverman, trans., *Mud and Water, a Collection of Talks by the Zen Master Bassui* (San Francisco, 1989), p. 108.
[3] See Robert Aitken, trans., *The Gateless Barrier*, Case 12, p.81 (San Francisco, 1990).
[4] See *The Gateless Barrier*, Case 23, p. 147.
[5] See Francis H. Cook, trans., *The Record of Transmitting the Light*, p. 27 (Los Angeles, 1991).
[6] See *The Gateless Barrier*, Case 1, p. 7.
[7] Philip B. Yampolsky, trans., *The Zen Master Hakuin: Selected Writings* (New York, 1971), pp. 163-4.