



Cold Mountain Zen

Hyakujo's Wild Duck

Teisho given at the end of half day sit on a Saturday (4.2.05) after Charmanie Mukherjee's passing.

Today's teisho will be on Case 53 in the Blue Rock Collection.

ENGO'S INTRODUCTION: The universe is not veiled; all its activities lie open. Whichever way he may go, he meets no obstruction. At all times he behaves independently. His every word is devoid of egocentricity, yet still has power to kill others. Tell me, where did the ancient worthy come to rest? See the following.

MAIN SUBJECT When Ba Daishi was out walking with Hyokujo, he saw a wild duck fly past. Daishi said, "What is it?" Hyakujo said, "It is a wild duck." Daishi said, "Where is it?" Hyakujo said, "It has flown away." Daishi at last gave Hyakujo's nose a sharp pinch. Hyakujo cried out with pain. Daishi said, "There, how can it fly away?"

SETCHO'S VERSE

The wild duck! What, how, and where?

Baso has seen, talked, taught, and exhausted

The meaning of mountain clouds and moonlit seas.

But Jo doesn't understand – "has flown away."

For those of you who may be here for the first time, let me explain that what I have just read aloud is a koan. In the Zen tradition, we train with what we call "koans," which might be understood as the stories or questions we focus on in meditation. People begin to practice Zen meditation by watching the breath: you sit on the cushion, straighten your back, and assume an appropriate posture. You breathe from the abdominal nerve center known as "hara" in Japanese, "dantian" in Chinese and "manipura" in the Indian tradition. You squeeze the breath out and release, squeeze out and release, until you reach a very balanced and calm state. If you do this kind of meditation for a number of months, your mind will begin to enter a deep, calm state on a regular basis, and thoughts will recede. This state is called "samadhi." Eventually the mind will become blank from time to time, and at some point you will have a profound experience of this emptiness or blankness. We call this emptiness mu-shin or wu-hsin, the "mind" or "heart" of "emptiness." After that phase of your training, the teacher will usually give you one of these koans.

Basically, koans are stories that involve some kind of a conundrum or contradiction. In order to work with a koan, you need to be able to enter into that state of deep blankness I just referred to. The way you work with a koan is to sit on the cushion, watching the breath until you enter the state of mu-shin. When you are in that state – in that very deep, receptive state--you can begin to work with the koan; you should focus your attention on the koan singlemindedly. The koan is little bit like a mantra and a little bit like a prayer. But it is somewhat different from both of them, also. Usually in a koan there is a key phrase or a key word—called a "turning phrase" or "turning word."

In this story of the wild duck, the turning phrase is “Flown away.” Flown away! If you are working with this koan, and I hope you and I will have chance to work on it together someday, you will need to sit on the cushion, straighten your back, enter deep samadhi, and then, when your mind is in mu-shin, that blank state of absorption, you should begin to silently say, “Flown away,” “Flown away,” along with each outbreath. Then this phrase will begin to descend into your unconscious—into what we call your Big Mind. You have a little mind which is your conscious mind, and this mind reflects, evaluates, compares, contrasts, assesses, makes plans and get disappointed when those plans don’t turn out. But you have a bigger mind which is not an evaluating mind and it has a deeper connection to things. It is not a verbal mind and it is not a conceptual mind. And as I said, it is connected to the world in a way the little mind – the discriminating mind--never can be.

So, the koan is recited and internalized; it gradually descends into the Big Mind, the unconscious mind, where it does its work invisibly. The conscious mind might think that nothing is happening, but little by little these koans begin to have their transformative effect on how we experience the world. Very often, the koan addresses kind of a contradiction or some kind of fear or obstacle in ourselves. We might not notice the contradiction with our small mind; the koan might simply seem like a rather strange story, but as it descends into our Big Mind, it begins to have a transformative effect. It is like throwing a magic stone into a well: when we look down at the water, we can see the stone descending for a little while, and then it sinks down into the dark depths where we can no longer see it. But then the water begins to boil! The water bubbles and boils until something comes out of the well. This is how a koan works. It is a great aid to practice, a really wonderful instrument for liberating ourselves from our fears and our attachments.

Today’s koan is this story: when Master Ba Daishi (also called Baso in Japanese, Ma-tzu in Chinese) was out walking with his student, the monk Hyakujo (Bai-chang in Chinese), they saw a wild duck fly past. Now, if you have been to one of our Zen retreats or sesshins, you know that the interchanges between student and teacher often take place in the formalized setting of the dokusan room. In the schedule of a Zen sesshin, there is a time when each person can meet with the teacher privately to work on the koan together. The student can come into the room and say, “My koan is breath perception” or “My koan is Hot water/ Cold water.” Then the student will say something or do something that reveals the condition of her mind or awareness at that moment. In the old days, however, in the Tang dynasty, the exchange between student and teacher was not always so formal. People were living in a sesshin atmosphere all the time. They were getting up together at the same time in the morning, and they were training together; there was work to be done, food to be prepared. People had to work together in the fields, and often student and teacher would be engaged in various activities side by side. In the classical period of Zen, a teacher working beside his student might suddenly turn and say something intended to test the student’s mind at that moment. It was like a spontaneous dokusan triggered by some unexpected event.

When Ba Daishi was out in the fields with Hyakujo, they saw a wild duck. Ba Daishi said, “What is it?” This might sound like an ordinary question but it’s actually a Zen question intended to determine the condition of the student’s mind. In response to this question, Hyakujo replies, “It’s a wild duck.” Actually, that’s not a bad answer. Hyakujo would later go on to become a great Zen master. At this time, though, he is a student, but he is obviously practicing well and his mind is present in the moment. When Ba Daishi asks “What is it?” Hyakujo doesn’t say, “Huh, what? I’m sorry--I was lost in thought. I was thinking about lunch.” He was present in the moment.

So far so good! It takes a lot of sitting to be like that. Then Baso pushes things a little further and says, “Where is it?” and Hyakujo says, “It has flown away! It’s gone!” “Flown away” is the center of this koan, the turning phrase.

As I said, I hope we will have the chance to do this koan together. Maybe in a sense we are doing it all the time, and in a way we have all been doing it intensely for the past few weeks. Some of you might have known Charmanie Mukherjee, who was a member of our group for a number of years. Her husband Peter (Pradip) comes here every Thursday night. He sits at the back of the room near the spot where we keep the cushions, and he quietly sits through the three sits without moving. He always says hello before he leaves. His wife also used to sit here until she got sick with an auto-immune disease somewhat like lupus; it is called “scleroderma.” Two weeks ago Charmanie died after many years of illness. She died during the last day of our March sesshin, about the time, I believe, when the teisho was starting. On the Wednesday of the week just after the sesshin some of us attended a funeral ceremony for Charmanie. This is really “flown away.” For many years now, I had been going to Charmanie and Peter’s house on Monday and Thursday afternoons at about 4:30 to sit with her prior to the meditation sessions that take place over here at 7:00. I would go to her house because she was physically incapacitated due to the deterioration of her lungs: she just couldn’t come over here anymore. She needed an oxygen pack and it had a time limitation. Also, the breathing apparatus was a little bit noisy, and Charmanie thought that she might disturb others.

But during this last week and the week before it, I had a rather haunting experience. I am now conditioned to leave my office at 4:30 or so. I am used to going to sit with Charmanie at her house every Monday and Thursday evening. But, of course, she is not there. She died two weeks ago.

It was my pleasure and honor to sit with her at her house. Sitting with her was a wonderful experience. She was an exceptionally kind-hearted person. Just very generous! I just can’t tell you how much I enjoyed her company and how unusual she was in the way she dealt with her illness. As I said at her funeral, I never saw anyone deal so well with a catastrophe like this. She came to this country from Sri Lanka without much money, got a job in the business world and saved some money and went back to school. She attended Cook College here at Rutgers, and she got a Ph.D. in Microbiology. She was an independent woman without a lot of money and coming from what you might call a developing part of the world. She was a real dynamo. I believe she worked for Colgate Palmolive, and she was being groomed to lead some of their overseas operations in South Asia. She was a research scientist and a business woman. She used to jog 3 miles a day, as I recall. One day she went to see her doctor, and he said, “You have a cold and I have to give you some antibiotics because it has settled in your lungs.” The doctor treated her but she got worse. Finally, she was diagnosed with a strange illness. Auto immune diseases are not very well understood. Scleroderma, especially of lungs, is not very common. In most cases, scleroderma affects your skin, but wherever the disease occurs, your immune system attacks your own tissues and kills them.

Basically Charmanie carried on with her work as long as she could. But she finally couldn’t do it anymore. Her lung capacity kept dropping all the time. Eventually, it became difficult for her to walk across the room. She had to go into seclusion in her house. She had been a person who was working 16 hours a day, and now she had nothing to do. Her physical situation deteriorated steadily. But I never saw her engage in self-pity or say a bitter word about her circumstances. When I would go to her house, she was always cheerful and friendly. We would sit together, and

she made great progress with her sitting practice. It must have been very difficult for her. The life she had made for herself was gone forever. Little by little, life flies away. It was very interesting and inspiring to see the courage she showed in the face of all this. I guess we will all have to live with this experience—though maybe not as dramatically. It is interesting that a number of members of our sangha have approached me recently about people in their lives who are quite ill or have just died. When any of us has to go through this, we are really challenged. The passing of people we care about makes us depressed and unhappy. It has a profound effect and destabilizes us. Death is so central to life, but we work very hard to keep it offstage. I know that Pradip and Charmanie and their sons had a wonderful life together. Now she is gone. I suspect that the two sons, Ami and Robin, are very much challenged by this event, after living with the fear of Charmanie's death for a long time. I know that Pradip is very challenged as well. How could they not be? And as I said, other members of our group have approached me about people in their lives who have died recently. We love these people so much, and then they're gone.

We might gain some consolation from thinking that when we die, we go to a better place and we will see our lost ones again. At some level, however, this belief is not necessarily very satisfying. There is a part of us that says, "They are really gone, and not coming back."

This is an aspect of life that we cannot escape--not just death but passing away. Everything is passing away. The other day, I was cleaning up the basement in our house, and it was a very moving experience. First of all, I should tell you that I am so sorry that the camera was ever invented. My wife is a photography addict and we have boxes and boxes of photographs in our house. We can't ever put them in a scrapbook because it would require a library of scrapbooks. We have photos of 'Our room in Mexico at 1:45 pm, June 25, 1977.' 'Our room at 2:30 pm.' 'Our room in Mexico 4:30 pm'! There may be a thousand photos or more, and there is a constant problem of the photo management. So we spend some time just cleaning up all the photos. But the other day, I was by myself pulling photos out of a folder. I pulled out a photo of my wife as a little girl – as a baby. This was only a few days after Charmanie's funeral. It was very poignant to see my wife as a little girl. In a very bitter-sweet way I realized how much I loved my wife and how sad I will be when she is gone, that is, if she goes first. Seeing this little baby, who is now a 50 year old woman--and some day she will be 70--is really poignant, bitter-sweet. We start out our lives with so much hope – with a sort of naïve joy--and then we all grow up and life hands us various kinds of hard knocks and we lose a little bit of our innocence. We lose our hopefulness and get older and older and things pass away.

My wife's mother died this year and I also came across photos of my mother-in-law, Shirley. Looking at them was also very poignant. Flown away! As we go through our daily lives, we don't always appreciate this transient aspect of things. The transience and instability of life. A professor I didn't know personally, but someone widely admired at Rutgers, died a couple of days ago. Some of you might have taken classes with him--Wilson Carey McWilliams, who taught in Political Science. He was the backbone of his department. Students loved his courses and the rooms were always filled to capacity. Another colleague, somebody I did know—Professor Richard Lockwood from French department--died only a few weeks earlier. This is constantly the case. Everything we know will fly away. Everyone we love will be gone. Really gone! We don't normally want to think about it. We pretend that things have a permanence they don't have, and when we begin to notice this impermanence which is fundamental to existence itself, we can get really down, really sad.

We all know that feeling. When the things you love are disappearing, it feels, literally, like your heart is aching or breaking. But one of the interesting things about Charmanie was that she knew that there was something beyond “flown away.” She knew that. I hope I didn’t offend anyone at her funeral because I had a hard time putting on a sad face and looking very depressed. You see, I really knew Charmanie’s mind pretty well, at least the part I could see in Zen practice. Charmanie put tremendous energy into her practice because she was dying. Some people think, “I’ve got all the time in the world, so why practice too much?” Some people do Zen half-heartedly. We have all kinds of strategies of postponement. But Charmanie had a clearly limited amount of time. She knew she was dying. She believed very strongly in this path and she threw herself into her practice. It was impressive. Sometimes I would come over to her house and she would be very sick. She was taking so many different kinds of medicines. She had to take various kinds antibiotics. She had kidney problems also—so she had to take diuretics. This led to problems with her circulatory system and she had to take medicine for her heart. In cases like this, the medicines themselves can make you sick. So when I would come to her house, she would be kind of low, a little bit blue, not feeling very well.

But we would sit down to meditate and at the end of an hour we would be laughing quietly together. She would be smiling and telling funny stories. She had quite a sense of humor. She also had these two dogs and after an hour the dogs couldn’t stand being away from her anymore. They would be scratching at the door-- u-u-u-u-u-u -- whining to come in. We would finally let them come in and they would roll around Charmanie on the floor. And the two of us would just laugh. Charmanie could laugh during those moments because she had reached a stage in her practice where she sometimes entered Big Mind on the cushion. In the little mind, the small self, we think about gain and loss, right and wrong. We think, “I wish I had done better on that test.” “I’m not happy about my pay check this month.” “What is going to happen to me in next few years?” That is little mind at work. Nothing is wrong with having a little mind. But every once in a while we enter another state where all of these concerns seem less important, and feel we connected to the heart of life. This is why people do meditation.

At first our entry into Big Mind is very subtle. You come in and sit on the cushion and you just feel a little better. You don’t really know why. Your legs hurt and your back gets tired but you just feel better at the end of the sit. You don’t even have to do meditation; sometimes this sort of thing happens spontaneously. When I was graduate student at the University of Washington, I remember going to the zoo. I was working myself to death. On one occasion, I was so burned out that I couldn’t read another word of whatever awful thing I was reading. Probably Heidegger. I was almost crying. I thought to myself, “I don’t belong in graduate school. I’m an idiot. My whole life is a failure.” Seeing me so miserable, my wife suggested that we get out of the house. “I can’t leave,” I said, “I’ve got to study.” “Come on,” she said. “Let’s go to the zoo!” So we went. But I was skeptical about it. I thought, “What could possible happen in a zoo!!” Anyway, we were walking by the lion’s cage when all the lions started roaring. I remember that the hair on my head stood up and the roaring blew me out of my little self. All of a sudden I felt absolutely fantastic. All of a sudden the roaring blew my cares away.

The same thing would sometimes happen when I was coming out of the house in the morning. If you know Seattle, you know that it is usually covered with clouds, but sometimes the clouds would clear up and I could see Mount Rainier, which looks somewhat like Mt. Fuji. On a clear day, Mt.

Rainier towers over Seattle. When the clouds blow away and you finally see the mountain, it's absolutely amazing. So, I would be coming out of my house thinking that I would never get these papers graded; I would never finish the presentation for my stupid graduate class. Then I would look up at the gigantic mountain and my cares were just blown away. I was connected to a bigger life. Zen practice does that in a very profound way.

You don't always have access to a troop of lions or a mountain floating in the sky in front you. But if you practice zazen, you begin to enter this bigger life. "Bigger life" is the only way I can describe it. Everything goes away but the Big One stays. Every figure in the picture goes away, but the Big Picture stays. This is not an intellectual argument but something you've probably experienced yourself. You've been "there" at some point. When you practice Zen, you spend more and more time in the bigger life. To tell you the truth, I was not terribly sad at Charmanie's funeral because I know how she had been to that place sometimes. It was deeply moving to see Charmanie going beyond all her troubles and sickness to enter this bigger life. And her eyes would be bright.

Many years ago, I had a chance to meet a Zen master who was dying of cancer. He was sick too! And he had to go and lie down and needed time to be alone with his pain and exhaustion. He would drift off into unrestful sleep. But, you know, he would sit with us and at the end of the sit, his eyes were so bright. His face was like a baby's face. So clear. He was so joyous even though he was dying! This was because he made contact with that bigger life.

The koan of the wild duck is saying, "Don't get too depressed." Everything is going away. That's true. All the things we love are going to disappear. But the bigger life stays. It is natural that when death comes to the people we love, we are going to cry. But if you know the path to the bigger life, you can get beyond this terrible sense of loss. Our heart-ache doesn't exactly go away but it transforms into joy. This may be scandalous to say. The person we love dies and this joy rushes up. It seems like a scandal! We might think, "This shouldn't be happening. I shouldn't feel joy." But actually, not so!! This feeling of joy is a tribute to the person who passed away. It shows that you are able to enter this bigger life along with the one who has gone. I think that this is the highest kind of tribute you can pay.

When Ba Daishi was out walking with Hyakujo, he saw a wild duck fly by. Ba Daishi said, "What is it?" Hyakujo replied, "A wild duck." Then Daishi asked, "Where is it," and Hyakujo answered, "Flown away." Ba Daishi can't accept this answer. He essentially says, "You don't understand. THIS is always here! Bigger life is always here!" Baso grabs Hyakujo's nose and he squeezes it: "There! How can it fly away?"

I don't know if Hyakujo got the message or if he just went away with a sore nose. But it is possible that what he felt at that moment was pure joy. We are afraid when we realize that everything we have loved is going away. We constantly try to hold on. The moment comes and the moment goes, and as it goes, we think that it will never come back. Gone forever! And that's true. The moment now passing will not come back, but there is another side to all this.

At the funeral, two Theravada monks gave a talk. Theravadins tend to stress one side of all this--the element of impermanence. One of the monks said, "Our friend Charmanie has died. All of us are going to die. Everything is impermanent. The candle is always going to blow out." That was where

he stopped. This is sometimes the Theravada perspective. And it's absolutely true! But there is another side to this matter, which is emphasized by the Zen tradition a little more strongly. The candle always lights up again. The candle always comes back to life. Everything passes away but THIS doesn't pass away. Ever renewing life!! In a certain sense, we die every moment. In another sense, there is no death. Just endless life! Both of these are true. If your mother has just died and someone says to you, "Don't worry, there is no death," that's not an appropriate response. Death is there—it's real.. Your mother is gone and the tears on your face are not an illusion. But the other side is also true. Endless life! Endless life! So please cry, but don't forget endless life. Don't feel ashamed if at the end of all your tears there is something welling up inside you that's a little bit like joy. That's the highest tribute you can pay -- to move beyond your sadness and return to the source! How can it fly away?

The wild duck! What, how, and where?

Baso has seen, talked, taught, and exhausted

The meaning of mountain clouds and moonlit seas.

But Jo doesn't understand – "has flown away."

There is one other aspect of this koan that I want to touch on briefly. If you practice zen, after a while you are going to become a wild duck yourself. Not everybody is comfortable in the presence of a wild duck. When you practice zen long enough, you will become an odd duck, that's for sure. But you will also become a wild duck. What do I mean by this? When I went to that funeral, I felt somewhat out of place. I'm very sorry Charmanie is gone! She died. I really loved her as a friend. She was wonderful person. But really and truly, there is a bigger life. Really and truly!! So I'm not going to cry too much. I know that Charmanie was a part of that bigger life.

Practicing Zen can make you a little bit strange as human beings go! But I think that walking this path means that you have to decide if you are comfortable being a little bit strange. We Zen people are going to be misunderstood at times. Please don't let that deter you from walking this beautiful path. It is perfectly ok to be a wild duck. It is not necessary for you to be sad and afraid all the time. You don't owe it to mankind to be miserable. There is nothing wrong with joy. There is nothing wrong with being unafraid of impermanence. So please don't try to be too normal.