

## A Teisho (Dharma Talk) On Rinzai Zen

### *Book of Serenity Case 38*

A version of this teisho was delivered on third day of the Cold Mountain Sangha's 2016 Winter Sesshin

Today, I want to talk about a koan I'm unable to locate right now. It's called, "Linji's True Person of No Rank." Somehow, the marker fell out of my book, and as I'm leafing through the pages with growing frustration, I'm unable to find it. So, this situation is a little like being in a dream.

Have you ever had a dream in which you've gone to work and then, looking down, you realize that you've forgotten to put on your pants? Or you might have dreamed—and this the English teacher's nightmare—that you're standing at the lectern in front of the class, only to realize that you don't have your lecture notes and you don't know what text you're supposed to lecture on. Or, perhaps, in your dream, you're a student again, about to take a test, but you suddenly understand that you haven't read the material and you don't even know what course you're in. This moment is a little bit like that for me.

Moments like these occur fairly often in our dreams. But we've all had such moments when we're awake as well. I'm having one now because I can't find the koan for this teisho even though I've read it dozens of times. At such moments, with all eyes on us, we might flail about anxiously. But then, all of a sudden, the pressure dissipates as everything recedes into the background. Our surroundings become dreamlike as we drop into another state of consciousness.

In that state, we surrender control. Instead of reacting from a place of fear, we simply observe the unfolding of events as though they don't involve us at all. I'm sure you've had moments like that. Maybe you failed to catch a fly ball when you were out in right field, or maybe you told a joke and nobody laughed at an important social function. Initially, we might feel acute embarrassment, helplessness or desperation. But our anxiety dissipates when we surrender control. But to who or what are we surrendering it?

In the koan I'm looking for, Master Linji says, "There is a Person of No Rank who goes in and out through the door of your face," and then he asks the monks in his temple if they've ever met that person. On the occasion, none of the monks answers with a "Yes." So, Linji has to answer the question himself. What he says to them I'll discuss later on.

But for now, I should point out that this koan is important to us, to our sangha, whether are dreaming right now or awake. As you know, our group belongs to a Linji lineage, and our particular style of practice has been passed on from teacher to student from the time of the Tang Dynasty Master Linji, or, as, the Japanese call him, "Rinzai." In China, Linji's school became the leading school of Zen, far outnumbering the Tsao-Tung or Soto school. Indeed, prior to the

Cultural Revolution, most mainland temples identified themselves with Linji. And yet, Linji Zen is not well understood in the United States, where the Soto school is preeminent, as it is in Japan. What accounted, we might ask, for our school's success in China after the Tang Dynasty? Perhaps this koan will give us a clue.

Of all Linji's teachings, the true Person of No Rank is undoubtedly the most important because Linji wants us to meet that Person face to face, if we do nothing else with our lives. Meeting the Person of No Rank is the whole point of our practice, he says, and unless we do, we're still living in ignorance.

You might not yet have encountered the Person of No Rank face to face, but as Westerners—people who were raised in the Western cultural tradition, nothing seems more obvious and self-evident than the existence of the person—the self. Christianity developed the idea of God as a self—the ultimate Self--and it also accepted the related belief that we as individuals have immortal souls. Later, the West became more secular, but the self continued to be a central concern. When the Enlightenment philosopher Descartes tried to find something he could know with absolute certainty, he didn't turn to God or even to the material world, but to himself. "I think, therefore I am," he declared. For him, the self--the thinking self--was the bedrock of certainty.

Even now, we modern people still try to hold fast to the self, although our isolation as individuals causes all kinds of problems. If you have a Barnes and Noble store near your home, it probably contains a large section of books under the Self-Help heading. The modern self needs all kinds of help because it has begun to feel much less solid and convincing to us. But still, the idea of the self has played such an important role for so long that it's hard for us to imagine alternatives. While the self today is subject to almost unbearable pressure—think of how many people are on Paxil and other antidepressants--we continue to assume that everything begins and ends with the "I" or "me."

Given our cultural heritage, we might decide that Linji's True Person of No Rank is the self—our own selves. We might say, "Of course, the Person of No Rank is me, just as I am!" But actually, this belief in the self as most real thing of all is what that Linji wants to call into question.

And now, luckily, I've found the koan! I've been looking in the wrong book. It's actually Case 38 in the *Book of Serenity*. Let me read the koan in full:

## INTRODUCTION

*Taking a thief for one's son, taking the servant for the master. Can a broken wooden ladle be your ancestor's skull? A donkey-saddle rim is not your father's jawbone either. When breaking earth, separating reeds, how do you discern the master?*

## CASE

*Linji said to the assembly, “There is a True Person of No Rank always going out and in through the portals of your face. Beginners who have not yet witnessed it, look! Look!”*

*Then a monk came forward and said, “What is the true man of no rank?”*

*Linji got down from the seat, grabbed and held him: the monk hesitated. Linji pushed him away and said, “The true man of no rank—what a piece of dry crap he is!”*

## VERSE

*Delusion and enlightenment are two sides of the same coin,  
Subtly communicated, with simplicity;  
Spring opens the hundred flowers, in one puff,  
Power pulls back nine bulls, in one yank.  
It’s hopeless—the mud and sand can’t be cleared away;  
Clearly blocking off the eye of the sweet spring,  
If suddenly it burst forth, it would freely flow.*

A moment ago I was making the point that modern people typically regard the self as real in a way that nothing else can be. And as it happens, the editor of the *Book of Serenity* Wansong makes this very point in his Introduction to the koan. Most of us are deeply confused, he says,

Taking a thief for one’s son, taking the servant for the master

The truth is that most people don’t know who they are because they start with the “I” as the foundation. When they pause and look within themselves, the first thing they seem to encounter, after all, is the self. And that’s true—the self seems to be right there. But Wansong says that this self is the “servant” of another, whom Linji calls the True Person of No Rank. The self you *think* you are—that’s nothing but a dream, according to Linji. And the Person of No Rank? That’s the Dreamer. You—or I should say all of us—are the dream of that Person, that Dreamer. Awakening means discovering that the True Person is who we really are, and who we have always been.

So far, I’ve been speaking here about people in the West, who see the self as the rock-bottom reality, but actually the same was true in China before the Dharma began to plant deep roots. Here’s what the great Taoist sage Zhuang Zhou has to say about what he also called the “True Person”:

The True Person, along with other men, gets his food from the earth, and derives his joy from Heaven. . . . [And] he whose mind is thus grandly fixed emits a heavenly light. In him who emits this heavenly light people see the True Person. When a man has cultivated himself (up to this point), thenceforth he remains constant in himself. When he is thus constant in himself, the human element will leave him, but Heaven will help him. Those whom their human element has left we call the people of Heaven. Those whom Heaven helps we call the Sons of Heaven.

When Chinese people heard Linji preach, they might have thought that he wanted them to be like Zhuang Zhou's True Person—a Son of Heaven. They should empty themselves out, as Zhuang Zhou says, and allow Heaven to fill them up with a divine light. Then they will be so perfect that they will transcend the human condition. Eventually, Taoists became obsessed with becoming immortals-- godlike beings—through a wide range of esoteric practices, including alchemy.

The point is that Taoists were practicing to become special people, special selves—people who were, as we say now, “highly evolved.” Even though the Taoists often quarreled with Confucian thinkers, many Taoists shared the Confucian belief in a hierarchical society based on the proper practice of ritual (*li*), with the emperor at the top, the mandarins under him, their retainers under them, down to the lowliest peasants. Many Westerners don't realize that Laozi's famous book the *Tao Te Ching* was meant as a handbook for rulers, telling them how to manage the peasantry and maintain their power through skillful inaction. “Keep the people's bellies fully and their heads empty,” Laozi tells prospective rulers.

Today, people think of Zen as a Buddhist version of Taoism, or a Taoist version of the Dharma, and that's true up to a point. Zen definitely borrowed many elements of Taoist teaching—including this term “True Person.” But Zen took it in a different and more radical direction. For the Taoists, the True Person was the unique man who had learned to harmonize himself with the Tao, allowing it, so to speak, to take possession of his body. These Taoists were not so different from Western Evangelicals who claim a special authority based on their communion with the Holy Spirit. And like the Western idea of the Divine Right of Kings, many Taoists believed the ideal emperor was the leader who had received the Mandate of Heaven.

But Linji rejected this hierarchical thinking. His Zen was a rejection of this entire architecture of thought, which separates the accomplished from the benighted, and the sage from ordinary folk. Notice that he says “The True Person of *No Rank*.” The “No Rank” part is vitally important. Linji's use of the Taoist term “True Person” is actually subversive because he believes that it's what we've always been—absolutely all of us. We can't become the True Person by harmonizing ourselves with Heaven! The True Person existed *before* Heaven, and it's here right now!

To see how different Zen really is from Taoism, consider the famous story of Zhuang Zhou and the butterfly. Here are Zhuang Zhou's words:

Once upon a time, I, Zhuang Zhou, dreamt I was a butterfly, fluttering here and there, enjoying myself fully and not knowing I was Zhuang Zhou. Suddenly I awoke, and came to myself, Zhuang Zhou. But now I do not know whether it was then I dreamt I was a butterfly, or whether I am now a butterfly dreaming I am a man.

Zhuang Zhou uses this story to illustrate that reality is always relative to our particular perspective. There's no point asking which was real—Zhuang Zhou or the butterfly. When Zhuang Zhou is awake, the butterfly becomes the dream—*his* dream. And from the standpoint of the butterfly, Zhuang Zhou becomes the dream, not the reality. Each of us lives in our own reality, and everything else is merely a feature of our personal dream.

But Linji says no. None of us is the dreamer, he would insist, because all of us are dream. And for this reason, there's no getting out. Even when we think we're out, we're not. As soon we awaken from one dream, we'll simply find ourselves in another one. Zhuang Zhou or the butterfly—take your pick—both are dreams. It's just as Wansong says in his commentary:

Delusion and enlightenment are two sides of the same coin. . . . It's hopeless—the mud and sand can't be cleared away.

At first, these words might make us feel trapped and panicky. If *every* reality is a kind of dream, what kind of enlightenment is possible? Wansong himself asks this very question:

When breaking earth, separating reeds, how do you discern the master?

Linji's answer is quite specific: stop trying to awaken from the dream and start paying attention to the Dreamer. Stop looking at the spectacle before your eyes and look instead at the workings of your own mind—which Linji often calls the “solitary brightness.” It's not solitary because, as we might think, it's alone in isolation from everything else. It's solitary because it's the source of everything we experience, especially the self. The True Person in Zen is not a highly evolved sage, the Buddhist version of the Taoist Heavenly man. The True Person of No Rank is your own mind. Here's Linji:

Greatly Virtuous Ones, your ancestors knew that the fundamental Person who receives and plays with light and shadow is the root source of all the Buddhas and that every place is a lodging for Wanderers in the Way to return to You yourself are the solitary brightness, which nothing can add to or diminish. It makes no distinctions because it's source of “dark” as well as “light”. . . .

Followers of the Way, as I look at it, we're no different from Shakyamuni. In all our various activities each day, is there anything we lack? The wonderful light of the six senses has never for a moment ceased to shine. If you could just look at it this way, then you'd be the kind of person who has nothing to do for the rest of your life. . . . If you want to be no different from the ancestors and buddhas, then never look for something outside yourselves. A moment of pure light in your mind – that is the Dharmakaya, the Essence-body of the Buddha lodged in you.

The Buddha is “lodged in you,” Linji says. But the Buddha is not the self. It's something deeper, something all of us have in common. This is a radical equality that far surpasses anything the Taoists imagined.

So far, everything I've said has been quite abstract. Tang Dynasty China seems quite far away; so too does all this talk about various True Persons. So, let's come at it another way.

Please consider that when you were only a few weeks old, you had already begun to form your identity, but you did it in a rather complicated way—by seeing yourself through other people's eyes.

Have heard about the work of the psychiatrist Daniel Sterne? Sterne revolutionized the study of infants by setting up a lab where he could unobtrusively photograph babies responding to their mothers. Gradually, he started to notice how carefully babies' attention tracked with the eye movements of their mothers. Sterne's films, pieces of which I have seen, are absolutely fascinating because when the mother looks at some object—a table or a piece of fruit—her face brightens as she becomes interested in it, and then, when the baby looks at the same thing, the baby's face brightens as well. Through the mother's eyes, the baby learns what she should pay attention to and how she should respond. "I should be interested in this," she thinks, or, "I should be excited by that."

The baby tracks the mother's gaze from this to that, but when the mother's eyes alight on the baby herself, the baby responds very powerfully. It's profoundly moving to see the baby watching the mother watch the baby, and the baby responds to this fusion in a very animated way with a lot of joy and love. Of course, I can't remember seeing myself in my mother's eyes, but I'm sure I enjoyed it. I know exactly how that feels, and it's the most wonderful feeling in the world. You know that feeling too: "I exist. I'm real and valued."

But the mother doesn't always meet the baby's eyes. When the baby tries to meet the mother's gaze but the mother looks away, the baby will experience great emotional distress. In Stern's films, you can see the baby's face darkening. It's very difficult for the baby to manage not being seen by the mother when it wants to be seen—when it wants to experience that beautiful fusion. And then, if the mother's eyes do indeed return to the baby, the baby's face brightens up, and all is well, crisis averted. But if the mother doesn't meet the baby's gaze, the baby's distress will build and build until the baby finally shuts down. The baby withdraws emotionally, and its eyes begin to look vacant, as if to say, "No one's home." I found watching that withdrawal very painful. And I think it's painful because we've all been there.

We learn to see the world—we learn to see ourselves—through the eyes of others, starting with our mother's eyes. But our world soon comes to include many people in addition to the mother, the one who gives us, in a way, our first personal self. As we move beyond our first relationship, the relationship with our mothers, we encounter many other eyes, and our self-image keeps changing in response. Sometimes those eyes are warm and approving, and sometimes they're withholding, leaving us in painful isolation. When no one sees you, who or what do you become?

Those moments when we feel unseen and unseeable are probably the most painful of any we experience. In those moments, we sometimes start to slip free from our normal reality. As I said earlier, you've probably had the experience—when you've become acutely embarrassed or shocked. First, you feel everything around you recede, as though it has become far away. Then, things that appeared solid and real become increasingly dreamlike, and the shift can produce a deep sense of unease. Yet those are the moments—often the only ones--when it's possible to catch a glimpse of the Person of No Rank.

When I was growing up, you could still hear old-time recording stars like Bing Crosby on the AM radio, singing a famous tune called "Did You Ever See a Dream Walking?" The first two stanzas go like this:

Something very strange and mystic happened to me  
Something realistic and as weird as can be  
Something that I feared . . . is now endeared to me  
And what a funny feeling, odd and yet so true  
Did a thing like this ever happen to you?

Did you ever see a dream walking? Well, I did  
Did you ever hear a dream talking? Well, I did  
Did you ever have a dream thrill you with, "Will you be mine?"  
Oh, it's so grand and it's too, too divine

Of course, the “dream” in the song is the man’s beautiful lover, whom he thinks of as too ethereal to be real flesh-and-blood. But the song was a big hit in its time because, at certain moments, we all understand that our so-called reality is somehow insubstantial, made up. Indeed, when we are most aroused—most attentive and alive—thing seems more, not less, like a dream. Let me repeat that: when we are at our most attentive and engaged, reality seems more like the dream it really is. Please test this out yourself. Try to notice how different your experience feels when you are, say, hiking a steep, rocky trail that requires your attention, or running your fourth mile in a ten kilometer race, or when you are working intensely to complete a job with a high stakes deadline. Notice what happens to the character of your experience.

Here another example. One of the many jobs I’ve had in my life was cooking in an Italian restaurant in Albuquerque, New Mexico—a very popular restaurant called “Mama Mia’s,” near the university. As a cook, I would spend much of the day preparing food—cooking huge trays of spaghetti, breading and frying slices of eggplant, and stuffing manicotti with ricotta cheese. These tasks required patience and care, but I could move at a fairly casual pace. We cooks—there were three of us--would chat the whole time among ourselves about politics, sports and, yes, women—we were young men, after all. We were free to stop for a coffee break, and we could even go outside to get some fresh air or have a smoke. But later in the day, things would change dramatically.

At six o’clock in the evening, when the restaurant first opened, we’d have just a few customers, but then, around seven, every table would be filled, and by eight, the bar downstairs would be packed with parties waiting for a table.

As a cook on the line, I had to take each waitress’s order, and then get every item ready to plate and serve after the customers had been given their bread, salad and drinks. Now, consider that there might be six waitresses on the floor, each with four tables, and three cooks on the line. Each table had, on average, four customers. And every table emptied and refilled roughly on the hour. You can do the math—I can’t. But it was pandemonium every night! And if a novice cook like me made a mistake—if you left a steak too long in the broiler or forgot to put a serving of manicotti into the oven to heat up--the returning waitress would be furious. Serving food late would cost her a good tip, and tips were her only real wages for the night. The waitresses would look at you with daggers in their eyes!

If you observe yourself at such moments, you will notice that time disappears—or rather, time contracts into one timeless “now,” with no past or future anywhere in sight. At such moments, you hardly think of yourself at all. There’s no “you” separate from the unfolding of a series of all-encompassing now’s.

Your reality at such moments is quite different from your normal reality, and, if you reflect on it after the fact, you will notice how much it resembles your dreams—how much it has the texture of a dream.

After a stressful evening like one I’ve just described, a cook might think to himself, “How did I ever manage that? I must have served more than a hundred customers tonight.” People who have lived through an ordeal like combat or a tornado often say the same thing: “How did I get through that?” The same holds true for people who meet some extraordinary challenge. Recently, I read an account of an Olympic runner who told a reporter that all he could remember of any race was the very beginning and the very end. He could remember leaning down, preparing to explode off his mark, and then he could recall crossing the finish line and suddenly noticing the other runners and the crowd. Stage actors often say the same thing: it’s like entering a trance or a dream. But which is which, really? Is that state of heightened attention the trance, or the state we call “everyday reality”? Or both?

Of course, you don’t have to run in the Olympics or work in an Italian restaurant to encounter the Dreamer behind the dream. Linji’s method was simply to turn his attention back to the mind itself, over and over again. At first, when we try to do this, it might seem very difficult. All kinds of thoughts get in the way; sights and sounds capture our attention. But really, these aren’t the problems we suppose them to be: whatever presents itself—thoughts or perceptions or anything else—you should just turn from them back to the mind again. Wansong describes the technique this way:

Clearly blocking off the eye of the sweet spring,  
If suddenly [the mind] burst forth, it would freely flow

Eventually, we undergo shift of consciousness. Awareness, which once seemed to be centered on the “I,” now comes from a deeper place, a place “behind” us—that’s how it feels at first. And our thoughts and sensations becomes less “sticky,” flowing on and on without constricting us. Eventually, after years of practice, another shift takes place: the “I” moves to the periphery and you discover the “solitary brightness” at the center of your consciousness.

In the context of his society, Linji’s teaching was radical because it challenged the elitism at the heart of Chinese tradition, Confucianism and Taoism. Linji rejected the very idea that self-cultivation could make people special. But his teaching was radical even in the context of the dharma. The idea of the “solitary brightness” at the core of the mind was quite familiar to most Mahayana Buddhists after Asanga and Vasubandhu, the founders of the Yogacara school. Mahayana Buddhists often referred to this “brightness” as the “Dharmakaya,” the “Body of the Buddha,” or the “tathagatagarbha,” the “womb of the Buddhas.” But Linji went a step further, pointing to the active, not passive, character of the Dharmakaya, which is shaping our perceptions all the time, and tirelessly working to wake us up even if we aren’t aware of it.



Although Linji never speaks about himself, he was clearly transformed by this insight: every word out from his mouth, every action, crackles with energy.

“Energy” is not a word most Americans associate with the dharma. “Serene,” “calm,” “balanced” and “detached”—Buddhism evokes these ideas instead. Indeed, this koan collection is entitled the *Book of Serenity*. And serenity appeals to us because our lives today produce so much stress, yet serenity itself can become the object of craving (*tanha*), clinging (*upadana*), and, consequently, suffering (*dukkha*). When we crave serenity or cling to it—especially when we’re under great stress—we can’t be open to events as they unfold, and our craving does more than contribute to the illusion of an isolated “self.”

Craving creates what we call “the real world” by imposing the illusion of stability on a process of ceaseless flux. Individually and collectively, we create a culture and environment that allows us to behave as though permanence, not change, is the order of things. Of course, we need predictability. We need to know that the New Jersey Transit train will leave Metropark at 7:05 AM and arrive at Penn Station by 8:00. But, actually, the maintenance of this arrangement requires constant change and adaptation. And when we count on permanence, things go wrong. Recently, the transit system has seen more and more delays precisely because the tracks are aging and the tunnel to New York is leaking and badly needs to be replaced. But we forgot about impermanence! We expected it all to last forever.

Normally, we manage to repress all the changes, large and small, that threaten to dissolve our static image of “the real,” but what happens when change becomes so sweeping that our reality falls apart? Toward the end of the Tang Dynasty, this is exactly what happened to the Middle Kingdom. A hundred years before Linji, the An Lushan rebellion nearly overthrew the government, and it ended with a third of the population dead. Far, far worse than our Civil War, the rebellion dealt the dynasty a fatal blow, and less than a century after Linji, China fell apart completely. The situation then must have resembled the regions of Mexico today controlled by the drug cartels, with warlords free to do anything they pleased. Under wrenching conditions like these, ordinary people can’t quite believe that such things can truly be happening.

When the reality we’ve worked to preserve starts to fall apart before our eyes, what replaces it can seem like a dream. And then, our inclination is to do something, anything, to bring back the world we’ve known. Ironically, the more we struggle to restore the world now passing away, the deeper becomes our sense of unreality. If the crisis become deep enough, we might feel completely paralyzed, but Linji says that we can mobilize a boundless energy—the kind of energy we begin to feel on the third day of sesshin. Here’s how Wansong describes it:

Spring opens the hundred flowers, in one puff,  
Power pulls back nine bulls, in one yank.

Notice that this energy has nothing to do with answering your koan, getting more sleep, or finding a way to overcome the throbbing in your tired legs. Instead, it comes from getting out of your own way. Trying to control events wears us out, but the boundless energy arises when, instead, we turn our attention back to the Person of No Rank. Linji puts it this way:

Followers of the Way, as to Buddha dharma, no effort is necessary. You have only to be ordinary, with nothing to do—defecating, urinating, wearing clothes, eating food, and lying down when tired.

Fools laugh at me,  
But the wise understand.

A man of old said,

Those who make work for themselves [in the world of form],  
are just a bunch of blockheads.

As these words suggest, some Chinese in Linji's time must have had the same reaction to his advice that many Americans would today. Linji seems to advocate what we call "quietism": refusing to engage with actual events. But he never tells us not to act. Instead, for Linji the problem is *how*.

So long as we are trying to produce a result we desire, that desire imprisons us. And the problem with desire is not that it's a sinful act like the disobedience of Adam and Eve's eating the apple in Eden. No, the problem with desire is that it contracts our awareness by making us ignore the possibilities of the emerging "now"—not the possibilities we want or expect but the ones we still haven't explored.

I see from my watch the time's almost run out, but we still have gotten to the koan's last part:

Then a monk came forward and said, "What is the True Person of No Rank?"

Linji got down from the seat, grabbed and held him: the monk hesitated. Linji pushed him away and said, "The True Man of No Rank—what a piece of dry crap he is!"

The key here is the word "hesitated." We hesitate when we get caught between the present and the past, the dream and the reality, and we forget to look back at the mind's own light. That's what happens to the monk. Because he forgets to look back at the mind, he asks Linji to give him what he already has, and Linji's response is to take away anything that might interfere with his meeting the True Person face to face—including the idea "True Person." Even the idea can become an obstacle when we use it to separate ourselves from the here-and-now.

But you shouldn't worry too much about the monk. Help is already on the way. You don't have the search for the True Person, in fact. The Person is already coming for you. All you have to do close your eyes and look.

[Three bells.]