

Case 88 of the Blue Cliff Record: Gensha's "Three Diseases"

Gensha, instructing the assembly, said,

"All old masters said, 'Attend to the living beings and save them.'

Suppose you face three people with different diseases, how would you attend to them? The blind person can't see, even if you take up a gavel or raise a whisk. The deaf person can't hear, even if you speak beautiful phrases. The dumb person can't speak, even if you ask him to speak up.

How would you attend to them? If you cannot attend to these people, Buddhist Dharma has no true efficacy."

A monk asked Unmon about this. Unmon said, "Make a deep bow." The monk made a deep bow and stood up. Unmon poked his staff at him. The monk retreated. Unmon said, "So you are not blind." Further he said, "Come here." The monk came closer to him. Unmon said, "So you are not deaf." Then he said, "Have you understood?" The monk said, "No." Unmon said, "So you are not dumb." With that, the monk came to an insight. (Trans: Sanbo Zen)

The Saving Power of Zen

Introduction:

Today we look at Case 88 of the Blue Cliff Record, a collection of 100 koan's compiled by Zen master Xuedo (Setcho in Japanese) and expanded with commentary and verse by Yuanwu (Engo). It is probably the most revered collection in Zen and acknowledged within Soto and Rinzai traditions as a classic.

The koan we will consider today raises a central challenge for Zen and indeed any religion that purports to be about salvation. Salvation of course is a central theme in Buddhism and is personified in the story of Shakyamuni Buddha, who was deeply affected by suffering and embarked on a quest to end it. He famously achieved this upon seeing the morning star and set out upon a lifetime of liberating others.

Like Shakyamuni, many of us also come to practice because we experience suffering and seek liberation. Buddhism clearly states that this is possible, and we have an inkling that might be true - otherwise why would we sign up? All this study and many hours of meditation, if it didn't lead anywhere - wouldn't we be crazy to be doing it! (I'm sure that thought has occurred to you

if you have ever sat a long retreat). This koan throws us into the heart of that question: does Zen have the power to save?

A word about Koans:

Before we look at this koan more closely, a reminder as to their character and function. Koan's are stories which demonstrate the living fact of Zen. Their saving power is that they cannot be answered conceptually – no matter how grand our argument, nor clever our concepts. Being immune to rationalisation, they can be of great value in unbundling the sticky thoughts that bind us. The great beauty in working with koans is we just can't answer them with more words or ideas. To 'pass' a koan, (and I'm not sure we ever pass one completely) we must respond from our unmediated experience.

Case 88 of the Blue Cliff is neatly split in two: Gensha's challenge (a koan in itself) and the taking up of this by Unmon in a 'mondo' or dialogue with an unnamed student. Let's consider first Gensha's challenge to Buddhism's salvific promise. Then we will look at Unmon's response. After that, if you will indulge me, I would like to share a personal story as to how Zen has helped liberate me, a deaf person, from deafness.

Gensha's Challenge:

Hakuin Zenji in his inimitable way says this is scary challenge – 'one that makes your hair stand on end!'. And it clearly is! To summarise, Gensha is saying: 'all worthy teachers purport that Buddhism is a tradition of universal compassion. But how can it fulfill that promise if it cannot reach everyone?'. He then presents the three disabled persons. Deaf, Blind and Dumb (perhaps even all three combined in one): 'if you can't attend to these people, the Buddhist dharma has no efficacy'. Now, we could just give up here and go home, sit on the couch and watch Netflix. But if we hold out any hope in the efficacy of Zen, we might want to answer this challenge.

On the surface we could say that Zen can liberate by skilful means or 'upaya', an offering of an appropriate response. If the person is blind, we might communicate by touch or sound. If the person is deaf, we could communicate by vision, written text, mime etc. We must adapt the

teaching to be appropriate to the situation and student. Whilst an indispensable teaching principle, that is not what the koan is asking us. It invites us to go deeper.

At depth, the koan is pointing to questions central to Zen's method of salvation: Is the Buddhist Dharma something that can be conferred or transmitted? And even more pointedly: 'What are we lacking?' and 'Who is there to be liberated?' Great Zen questions, which we will leave hanging for the moment, whilst we consider Unmon's response.

Unmon's Response:

Unmon's mondo occurs with an unnamed student, who is troubled by Gensha's question and is seeking advice. Unmon, a great teacher, true to form, doesn't enter into discourse but moves to action. 'Make a Deep Bow' he asks. The monk bows and then stands up (a perfect presentation of Buddhist liberation - but does he realise it?). After the monk stands, Unmon goes to poke him & he retreats: 'so you are not blind'. This continues with each sense, until the monk is said to have gained 'some insight'. The question for us is: what is going on in this highly unusual dialogue? and what insight has been gained? Again, as we well know, a conceptual answer such as I am stringing together now, just doesn't cut it. The answer must be our own.

How Zen Saved Me

I'd like to go off-piste now and tell a story of my own experience of the liberating power of Zen, as someone who became profoundly deaf. In a roundabout way, this might help us appreciate the Koan we have just looked at, which we will circle back to at the end.

Some here will know my life once revolved around music, guitar playing and bands. I had a reasonable classical training in clarinet as a young person, but the real spark came when I discovered the Beatles and Stones and then the old Blues Singers and Folksters and also Punk Rock and modern alternative music. My *'life was saved by Rock n Roll'* as Lou Reed once sang. As a teenager, I was struck by the creativity and energy of popular music, and it became a passion lasting into my early 20's and guitar playing was central to it. All my friends were

musicians and I remember often falling asleep practicing. There was always a song revolving in my head (a kind of mantra I suppose) and music was never far away.

In my early 20's (the early 2000's), I started to have the first signs of hearing loss. After some investigation the cause was discovered to be Meniere's disease, a syndrome that does not have a known cause but often leads to vertigo and sometimes progressive hearing loss. Initially it was one ear - it's rare for it to be bilateral. Unfortunately, it progressed to the other ear and despite various treatments an inevitable decline occurred such that I could not hear or play music, nor even follow conversations. Things got so bad I had to learn to lip-read to be able to make sense of the garbled noise I was getting through hearing aids.

Somewhere within this period I was struck by a deep depression - related no doubt to the hearing loss, but also meaning of life questions that had been percolating for a while. I spent a year locked in a room, sometimes reading philosophy and religion, desperate for an answer to a life that seemed bereft of any meaning, sleeping most of the time as waking life was unbearable.

A Spark of Compassion

The thing that got me out of bed was a phone call late at night, regarding a friend who was now in Intensive Care Unit (ICU). Paul was a man born with significant Cerebral Palsy and cognitive disability, who I had volunteered with as a younger person. He had grown up in an institution, had no next of kin and I was listed as his closest contact. I dusted myself off and went up to the hospital. The ICU doctor told me Paul had pneumonia, that he was going to die, and due to the twisted shape of his body and lungs they did not think artificial ventilation advisable. This roused my sense of compassion and care for someone and something beyond my own skin. I was energised and sought legal and medical advice and eventually stood in as Paul's health advocate. Paul received life-saving treatment from the hospital, other supporters rallied around, and we even ended up making good friends with the head of ICU, as we were there for some time. Paul ended up having another good and healthy 10 years of life and got to visit the Mardi Gras in Sydney twice - a long-held dream of his.

Finding Zen

A spark of compassion is what helped me out of bed. What helped me to stay out was Zen. I had stumbled across it in the University library when I should have been studying something else. I somehow always found myself in the religion section, though I wasn't taking any courses in it. First it was the Upanishads and the Gita, then the Daoists - particularly Chuang Tzu who I loved, and it was a natural progression onwards to Zen. Upon reading as much as I could, I thought I could stop with Zen as I had found a way to answer my deep held questions. Yet, all the books were telling me that it was not enough to read, one needed to practice. So I looked for a Zen centre. Luckily, I came across Mountain Moon Sangha. The Teacher was Roselyn Stone, a Canadian who had studied with and was a successor of Yamada Koun Roshi, the famous master featured in the Three Pillars of Zen. So, there appeared to be a good pedigree. I also liked the idea of studying with a female teacher as kind of alternative to the male domination of much religion. With this inspiration, I went to check out the group at their Zendo in Geelong St East Brisbane where Roshi Stone visited for 6 months of the year to conduct a residency in Australia. I was made to feel welcome, but there was no pressure to join. After some time sitting with her group, I asked to be her student.

Roselyn was a clear teacher, focused on practice. She would regularly say words to the effect that 'a little bit of practice is better than a lot of reading'. The initial practice given to me was following the breath and I remember many times going to see her in Dokusan to discuss it. After politely listening to my questions, encouragement was always given to 'return to the breath'. One time in mild-frustration I remember saying: 'this practice is like water on stone' and her immediate response was: 'Have you been to Natural Bridge?'. Natural bridge for those who don't know it, is a beautiful cave carved in rock by a plunging waterfall in the World Heritage rainforest of the Gold Coast. A wonderful image of breaking through and encouragement for practice.

I could go on and reminisce, but what I wanted to point out is that this simple practice can save us from certainties which bind us. I had been trapped in deep depressions with some very real causes, but my response was simply not helpful, worsening rather than healing the situation. I needed a way out and the practice of returning to the present again and again, strengthened my ability to be free of what was binding me.

When Roselyn left around 2003 to return to Canada, I continued with her successor Roshi Mervyn and experienced the same discerning eye, listening ear and unwavering advice to let go of the productions of the mind and return to the present. Mervyn will often cite Zen Master Fr Ama Samy's teaching phrases, 'there are no good sits, nor bad sits: just sits' and '1000 thoughts are 1000 opportunities to return to the practice'. Wise advice, that we need to hear again and again until we experience its truth and know for ourselves that the practice works.

From Roshi Mervyn I discovered more about Zen's efficacious means and this could be summed up as follows:

- 1) In Zen you are given a practice that works and a clear path to follow.
- 2) You have a faithful guide along the way - initially Roshi Stone and then Mervyn who walked with me for 20 years, a good listener, kind and compassionate in the Dokusan room, always appropriate and unwaveringly clear about the fact of Zen.
- 3) You also have a community of friends (the Sangha) you are practicing with who encourage each other along the way.

You get a pretty good deal when you sign up to Zen. At least that is my experience, and I am grateful to Roshi Mervyn for his many years of unwavering support and to the support of our practice community.

Hearing beyond hearing

Ultimately, the practice of Zen has helped me not be limited by an idea of deafness. I've discovered through it, that being constrained by an idea of what is, or what might have been, is to bind myself unnecessarily to a painful existence. Surprisingly, the pathway of practice was not to pole-vault over my difficulties, but to return to them. Zen has helped me discover that being truly at home with hearing loss is also to transcend it. The profound beauty of this efficacious practice is that you can apply it to everything.

There is a wonderful quote from M Scott Peck that speaks to this:

“Life is difficult. This is a great truth, one of the greatest truths. It is a great truth because once we truly see this truth, we transcend it. Once we truly know that life is difficult—once we truly understand and accept it—then life is no longer difficult. Because once it is accepted, the fact that life is difficult no longer matters.”

— M. Scott Peck *The Road Less Travelled*

Circling back now to our Koan, I can comfortably say to Master Gensha and Master Unmon:
‘Can you speak up a bit please - I can’t hear you!’ No deafness, nor deaf person - just the fact, free of any sticking thoughts. So, on this beautiful spring day, whether your eyes, ear and tongue function properly (or not), enjoy being deaf, blind and dumb and also hearing, seeing and speaking - it is truly a miracle.

Gassho ^\