

Unmon's 'Bright Light'

CASE 86 of the Blue Cliff Record

Instruction: One has the world firmly in one's grasp without a hairsbreadth of space; One cuts off the myriad streams, leaving not a drop. If you open your mouth it is already an error; If you have a doubt it is already off the mark. Just tell me: What is the eye which has passed the barrier? To test I am citing this, look!

Case: Unmon, giving instruction, said, "Everyone has his or her own bright light. When you look at it, you can't see it; it is complete darkness. Now, what is the bright light of you all?" He himself answered on behalf of the monks, "The kitchen and the entrance gate." Again he said, "It would be better not to have even the best things."

Verse: Shining on its own, the solitary light in a row. I open up a single way for you. The flowers fall; the tree has no shadow. When seeing, who does not see? Seeing, not seeing. Riding backwards on the bull and entering the Buddha hall.

(Trans. Sanbo Zen)

Welcome everyone to our first Zenkai at St Paul's East Brisbane Church hall (I think!). We have of course been sitting here for more than twenty years on a weekday evening interrupted only by the pandemic. Lots of good practice has occurred in that time and hundreds of people have walked through these brown wooden doors – including the late Roshi Roselyn Stone who visited when Mervyn and Cecilie first founded Sun Mountain Zen in 2003. It seems like only a few years ago that she was here, proud of her successors and the continuation of a practice which she deeply valued. Like her own teacher Koun Roshi, she is no longer with us, yet we carry on this practice which helps us to see who we truly are. I'm sure she would be most chuffed to see us sitting here today.

That brings us to the topic of today's talk. For those new to Zenkai it is our tradition to discuss a Koan from one of the classic collections, in a talk called a 'Teisho'. Before continuing I'll take a few moments to explain these terms.

A 'Koan' is a story which is highly valued in Zen for way it expresses self-nature. A 'Teisho' or 'Presentation of the Shout', is a talk by a teacher which often includes explication but must not dispense with a *direct* presentation of the Koan. This follows the logic of the Zen experience and does not rely on the usual arguments deployed in most talks or lectures. In short, Koans and talks about them may appear to be crazy and deliberately confusing! However, when viewed from the standpoint of Zen they are most logical and straightforward – not a single thing is hidden. So, the territory we are entering can be bewildering at first, but you get used to it and even come to like it as a way of reminding you of a reality that cannot be grasped yet can be *lived*. This necessitates a radical letting go, which might seem scary at first but the experience of many is that it is deeply consoling.

Today's Koan is from one of the great teachers of Zen. Yun-Men (Unmon in Japanese) is a tenth century master and someone who has respect across centuries among the many

luminaries of Zen. His teaching is very clear and has been likened to a 'red flag waving upon a distant hill': i.e. easy to see from a distance, but also hard to reach. We might also liken it to a take-off without much in terms of a runway. A kind of 'push off the cliff' form of Zen and very challenging. Yun-Men is well known for his iconoclasm and down to earth, 'proto-punk' humour (one of the reasons I like him), and for having a great many enlightened successors.

Despite the difficulty of his uncompromising style, his words have proven very helpful to practitioners over the years. Many have been turned into Koans: phrases or sayings used in contemplation to untether the mind. The bulk of Koans in the Blue Cliff record come from Yun-Men and you might even have heard of some of them. 'Every Day is a Good Day' is a famous one and the description of Buddha as 'dried shit-stick' (or Kanshiketsu!) - another.

The Koan we will look at today is called 'Unmon's Bright Light' and appears as case 86 of the famous Blue Cliff Record. It reads as follows:

Unmon, giving instruction, said, "Everyone has his or her own bright light. When you look at it, you can't see it; it is complete darkness. Now, what is the bright light of you all?" He himself answered on behalf of the monks, "The kitchen and the entrance gate." Again he said, "It would be better not to have even the best things."

What a wonderful pithy case. It's short so we can go through it line by line. I chose this for its final line, but let's start at the beginning.

Unmon, giving instruction, said, "Everyone has his or her own bright light.

Yun-men teaching the assembly says, everyone has their own bright-light, which is of course nothing other than true-nature, Buddha-nature, Christ-nature, ultimate reality - whatever it is you want to call it. Like Dorothy with her ruby red slippers, Yun-Men reminds us, we already have what we need - no one can give it to us nor take it away, it is our natural resting place and home, and yet.

When you look at it, you can't see it; it is complete darkness.

When we try to describe, imagine, or picture it we cannot. Why is this? Well, it is the heart of our being, empty, boundless, and alive. Beyond the reach discriminating thought such that even someone with the gifts of a Shakespeare could not do it justice. We might liken it to the eye of our own seeing, which provides a vivid image of the world where absolutely everything is taken in, yet it cannot picture itself. The line that comes up for me here is the famous one from the Diamond Sutra: '*dwelling nowhere mind comes forth*'. Whilst it cannot be pictured nor grasped, it is something we may glimpse and even have deep realisation of in the flash of Kensho (another Zen term which means 'seeing true nature'). More humbly, it is something we all experience on the cushions every time we notice our mind is wandering and return to our practice.

Now, what is the bright light of you all?"

Here Yun-men is simply asking us what our true nature is. How would you answer him? Apparently, no one could despite his repeated use of this question for twenty years, so:

He himself answered on behalf of the monks, "The kitchen and the entrance gate."

This might appear to be a non-sequitur. But if it were only that, there would be no Zen in it. What he is saying is that it's just this present reality. The polished floor, the brown wooden doors we entered through this morning, this kotsu (tap floor) - a world of no separation where everything is nothing other than 'I'. Yet in talking this way we run the risk of tripping over our concepts – stuck on identifying with a particular manifestation of It. Which quickly becomes stale, dead and lifeless Zen. So, to clear this up Yun-men adds the following:

Again, he said, "It would be better not to have even the best things."

This is the line for which I selected the Koan and valuable reminder of the radical nature of our practice which is an invitation to leap beyond the self, ego or 'small I'. I don't know about you but I'm constantly getting caught in the idea of *gaining* something, *having* something, *being* someone; beneath which there are seemingly endless wants, needs and desires. The world of Samsara (birth and death) and of Dukkha (suffering) as classical Buddhism describes it, where we are never satisfied. This final line reminds us that true satisfaction can be found in a complete letting go, having and being absolutely nothing (and not even nothing!). With this view, we have nothing to lose and no matter where we go, we are always at home.

Roshi Cecilie has a lovely teaching phrase I've heard many times in Dokusan that captures this:

'You can enjoy it all, but you cannot keep any of it'.

And Matsuo Basho, this lovely poem:

Without looking back,

Leaving one home

For the next.

These lines speak to the great freedom we uncover through our Zen practice from which arises great wisdom and compassion. Letting go and embracing the truth of impermanence is not for the faint-hearted, but it is possibly the most heartening reality of all.

Now the talk is finished. It is so crammed full of concepts that Yun- Men would have chased me out of the room for before I even began speaking! As good Zen students we know that these words are just chaff in the wind - it's up to us to forget them and do the work or waking up. Life is short and 'all things pass quickly away' as the evening chant reminds us. It's been a pleasure sitting with you here this morning. As Yun-Men would often say at the end of his talks: 'Take Care'.

Gassho.

SMZ ZENKAI St Paul's East Brisbane

Richard Warner 06/04/24