

Blue Cliff Record: Case 91 The Rhinoceros

Case (abbreviated version)

One day, Enkan called to his assistant, "Bring me the rhinoceros fan."

The assistant said, "It is broken."

Enkan said, "In that case, bring me the rhinoceros."

Verse (Blue Cliff Record, composed by Setcho [980-1052])

The rhinoceros fan has long been in use,

But when questioned, actually nobody knows.

The boundless pure breeze and the horn,

Just like clouds and rain when gone are hard to pursue.

(The following is from John Tarrant's book, "Bring Me the Rhinoceros," unless otherwise noted.)

MEETING THE INCONCEIVABLE

Why, sometimes I've believed as many as
six impossible things before breakfast.

- The Red Queen, recorded by Lewis Carroll

Pointers

(from the Blue Cliff Record, composed by Engo [1063-1135])

To transcend emotion, detach from views, remove bonds and dissolve sticking points, to uphold the fundamental vehicle of transcendence and support the treasury of the eye of the true Dharma, you must also respond equally in all ten directions, be crystal clear in all respects, and directly attain to such a realm. But tell me, are there any who attain alike, realize alike, die alike and live alike? To test, I cite this to see.

(from Bring Me the Rhinoceros, composed by John Tarrant)

We sometimes think of consciousness as a lamp, making a golden cone of light on the surface of a desk. Outside the yellow circle everything is dark and unknown. The usual way of approaching things is to try to extend the yellow circle into the darkness. Or perhaps to drag objects in from the dark. That is working out of what you can conceive of, the bright area of what you already know. This koan takes things the other way. Here you depend on what is unknown and inconceivable to sustain you. Most of life is inconceivable; even your left hand can't be fully conceived of though it can be very useful. And if you try hard to conceive of what your hand does, it won't play the piano very well. The inconceivable is the source of all that comes into being. This koan is not about making what is unknown, known. Instead it is an exercise in relying on and making friends with the inconceivable, using a casual event to start an exploration into the unlit realms.

Commentary – on the koan

People came to Enkan because they suffered and didn't know what else to do. The assistant was usually present when the teacher had public conversations, and he noticed that Enkan had a knack of listening without putting distance between himself and the visitors. Soon the assistant, who had thought of himself merely as a witness, found himself being pulled into the stories he heard. He began to feel off balance a lot of the time. He felt even more off balance because with Enkan he never knew whether he was in an ordinary conversation or not.

"All our conversations are ordinary," said Enkan.

"Then why is it so hard for me to stay on my feet?" the assistant asked.

"No need to stay on your feet."

And there he was, off balance again.

A traveler had given the governor a fan made of rhinoceros horn, and under the Zen rule that expensive, useless objects flow to those who don't care about them, the governor gave the fan to Enkan. Everyone forgot about it, until one summer day, Enkan asked, "Bring me the rhinoceros fan."

"The fan is broken," said the assistant.

"In that case," replied Enkan, "bring me the rhinoceros."

The assistant was struck dumb.

Another of those present, Zifu, drew a circle and wrote the characters for the word *rhinoceros* inside it.

When Enkan asked for the rhinoceros it was a world-stopping question for the assistant. The glue that connected one thought to another – the glue that made his reality – had failed. In his silence was a doubt that spread quickly to everything. Enkan had told him that doubt is a valuable spiritual state, but he hadn't understood. Now he saw that this doubt was a form of spaciousness. It destroyed any trivial thought – almost any thought, actually. His rhinoceros was a doubt about everything he was.

Once a visitor asked the old master, "What is the real body of the great Sun Buddha?"

The assistant groaned privately. Even he couldn't work out what the question meant, and it seemed to be far from the man's real life. The assistant was learning some things though: he saw that he was squirming because his own questions were like that too, designed to conceal his own helplessness and fear.

But Enkan wasn't provoked by helplessness and fear and just said mildly, "Pass me that water pitcher."

The pitcher was in a new style – white with a blue fish – and had also been sent by the governor. The man brought it.

Enkan then said, "Would you put it back where it was?"

The visitor did just that. He was eager to return to his important question, which he repeated, "What is the real body of the great Sun Buddha?"

"That old Buddha died a long time ago," said Enkan.

The assistant began to laugh inwardly, not at the man but with him; he could see that the simple movement of the water jug held a beauty stronger than any religious idea. The laughter seemed to put him on the verge of a great discovery; then it subsided. The poor visitor had been so intent on his question that he missed the answer – a rhinoceros was in front of him, but he returned resolutely to the fan.

Commentary – working with the koan

This koan points out that if you have a problem, you might not need to expand the pool of the known. Instead it might be possible to deal with problems that seem to be insoluble without translating them into something you can already understand. Taking such a course would mean accepting and even embracing being in the dark.

Can you remember a time when a situation stopped you in your tracks, not knowing what to do or say, your mind frozen by the rhinoceros of the apparently impossible, and while you stood there, another person simply acted and restored the flow of life? This koan can help you bring to life that other person within yourself. Asked for the rhinoceros, Zifu immediately drew a circle and wrote in it the characters for the word *rhinoceros*. He was willing just to act even though a correct course of action was not visible before he began to move. If you are stuck in some way or in a tight corner and can't imagine a way out, this koan might help. It doesn't require you to know where you are going, or need a solution that makes sense in terms of the problem.

If you rely on the inconceivable, you cannot know what will happen. What you can conceive of might take away your life. On the other hand, what you cannot conceive of might give you your life and even unexpected joy.

When a woman's child died, she immediately knew that it would now be impossible to witness tomorrow and everything past tomorrow – high school graduation, marriage, grandchildren. Conceiving of things has its uses, but in this case, everything she expected led to pain. It was as if she were trying to wish the fan back into wholeness, or to imagine a way

to fix the broken fan. However hard she tried, it couldn't be restored. She found that she could only depend upon what was inconceivable.

When she accepted that her life was now outside anything she had ever imagined, there was no reason for living, and, at the same time, there was no reason why she couldn't survive or feel joy. Many people say things like, "My children give my life meaning," or, "My grandchildren give me reason to live." This mother discovered, on the contrary, that the search for meaning led to unbearable sorrow. She had to live merely for the sake of life, without justifications or achievements. She found that she was willing to do this. It also came to her that taking this path was generous to her daughter.

She could think of her daughter with happiness, the way she used to wonder about her child's day in school. She could even speak with her child in her mind the way she did when she first knew she was pregnant. She did not have to think that her daughter's life was flawed or incomplete or that it came out wrong in the end. The perfection she had seen in her daughter as a baby extended to the girl's whole life, and even to her death. That was bringing the rhinoceros. Holding the thought of what should have or could have happened was trying to mend the broken fan. She was not who she had expected to be. In that way, she lived on and found a valuable life for herself.

The inconceivable nature of the world becomes obvious in times of catastrophe, yet it is always present.

The old teachers thought that what is inconceivable to us is, ultimately, the only thing that we can genuinely rely on. In this way they managed to find happiness inside disaster and peace inside war. When disaster is here, and you want to be happy, the happiness has to happen here, the dancing and the music here, even while there is disaster. Where else would you find happiness?

The inconceivable is present in the supermarket next to the cans of fajita sauce. All that is needed is for someone not to fulfill your expectations. Everyone has seen kids in a parking lot doing a skateboard trick – not something spectacular – they just jump while the skateboard sticks to their feet. The only remarkable thing is that the way the board sticks to their feet looks impossible. They could never do this by conceiving of it, and they have no way of teaching it to one another. One kid does the trick and the others see it and try it over and over. They just rely on the rhinoceros.

The rhinoceros koan points to a way of functioning that welcomes any new conception of reality but does not depend upon it. Perhaps the excitement of a new idea comes partly from the feeling of freedom that accompanies the loss of the previous idea.

"Bring me the rhinoceros fan."

"It is broken."

"In that case, bring me the rhinoceros."