

Gateless Gate (Jp. Mumonkan): Case 19 Ordinary Mind Is the Way

Case

(from Bring Me the Rhinoceros, John Tarrant)

Joshu asked Nansen, "What is the Way?"

Nansen said, "Ordinary mind is the Way."

"Should I turn toward it or not?"

"If you turn toward it you turn away from it."

Joshu asked, "How can I know the Way if I don't turn toward it?"

Nansen said, "The Way is not about knowing or not knowing. When you know something you are deluded, and when you don't know, you are just empty-headed. When you reach the Way beyond doubt, it is as vast and infinite as space. You can't say it's right or wrong." With these words, Joshu had sudden realization.

(from The Gateless Gate, translated by Eiichi Shimomise)

Joshu asked Nansen, "What is the Way?"

Nansen answered, "Your ordinary mind--that is the Way."

Joshu said, "Can it be grasped (for study)?"

Nansen replied, "The more you pursue, the more does it slip away."

Joshu asked once more, "How can you know it is the Way?"

Nansen responded, "The Way does not belong to knowledge, nor does it belong to non-knowledge. Knowledge is illusion. Non-knowledge is beyond discrimination. When you get to this Way without doubt, you are free like the vastness of space, an unfathomable void, so how can you explain it by yes or no?" Upon hearing this, Joshu was awakened.

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

THE HEAVEN THAT'S ALREADY HERE

Just watch children playing.
Eat vegetable soup instead of duck stew.

- Matsuo Basho's advice to poets

Pointers

(From The Gateless Gate, Ekai Mumon's [1183-1260] comments)

The question Joshu asked Nansen was dissolved by a stroke. After being enlightened, Joshu must further his pursuit 30 more years to exhaust that meaning.

Hundred flowers in Spring, the moon in Autumn,

The cool wind in Summer and Winter's snow.

If your mind is not clouded with things,

You are happy at any time.

(From Bring Me the Rhinoceros, John Tarrant)

It's natural to look for the things you want outside of where you are now. That is the whole point of a journey. Yet this moment is all anyone has. So if freedom, love, beauty, grace, and whatever else is desirable are to appear, they must appear in a now. It would be nice if they appeared in the now you have now. And if they are to appear and endure, they will have to be found in ordinary circumstances, since ordinary circumstances fill most of life. The marvelous, the lovely, will have to be right here in the room where someone is reading, someone is sick, someone is coughing, or a man is yelling at a dog. It will have to appear in the sound of rain splashing off trees, of a truck laboring up a grade, of TV from another room. It will have to appear in the sight of a child running, in the feeling of a headache, in the anxiety of preparing for exams, in worrying over a sick child, it will have to appear in what is ordinary.

Commentary – on the koan

From the age of eighteen, Joshu was the student of the great master Nansen. He worked in the gardens, ran errands, studied, and tried to meditate, becoming half student, half son to the older man. The meditation was the problem. He wanted his meditation to be athletic, single-minded, convinced – everything he wasn't. He had a sense that there were great, spacious realms of consciousness, but not for him. As soon as he sat down to meditate, he wanted to get up again. He couldn't banish the flurry of distractions, or if he did, he just felt dull. So he asked for technical support.

Joshu was unclear about the problem and so he was unsure what to ask. He was also embarrassed, so he began with a general question that didn't give too much away.

"What is the Way?"

"Ordinary mind is the Way," said his teacher.

"But that's just the problem," thought Joshu, "I couldn't be more mundane. One minute it's all enlightenment this, enlightenment that, and the next I'm dreaming about girls." He couldn't imagine that the life he already had might be beautiful or true. He cut to his technical question.

"Should I turn toward it or not?"

"If you turn toward it you turn away from it." Nansen seemed amused.

Joshu considered this. The teacher had a point, but it was a very frustrating point. Sometimes the young man would think he was meditating, but he wasn't really; he was trying to meditate. The trying seemed to be in the way. It was like learning to swim: if you thrash about too much, you sink, but if you stop thrashing about, you float. Yet he had no trust in his body's buoyancy. "At first," he brooded, "you sink no matter what." And he was genuinely puzzled.

He had never done a single thing in his life without trying. His mind wandered. Recently he was having intense memories of childhood in which he seemed to be in his home, and to see the golden light coming through the door with such perfect richness that he might have bathed in it. But whatever came to mind, he thought, "This isn't it," and tried to push past it. Wherever he turned there was a wall.

He burst out, "How can I know the Way if I don't turn toward it?"

The teacher seemed to have moved closer, though in fact he hadn't stirred. The boy became calmer, aware of being close to the older man, of the scent of pines, of the length of the moment, just as in his visions of childhood.

"The Way is not about knowing or not knowing. When you know something you are deluded, and when you don't know you are just empty-headed. When you reach the Way beyond doubt, it is as vast and infinite as space. You can't say it's right or wrong."

On the outside, these words didn't make any more sense than others Joshu had heard, but at this moment he understood them. This completely surprised him and almost everyone else who knew him. It was not a great, crashing awakening, but still, it was a relief, something real to rest on. When he looked up, things were exactly so, the traffic on the road, the sound of a hammer – a genuine moment.

From that time on he was not in a hurry; he was happy with slowness and plainness – children growing, trees moving across a hillside, year by year. "Ah, this," he thought, "this, this." He never used energy that he didn't have to use. He studied with his teacher for forty more years until the old man died. At about sixty, he went on a long, slow pilgrimage for twenty years. He didn't bother teaching till he was about eighty and so old that it seemed somehow discourteous not to. It is said that he taught until he died at one hundred and nineteen. He was terrific at conveying the beauty of ordinariness.

Commentary – working with the koan

When you observe common things closely they have an emphatic quality, a thusness that is like a charge around them and which is both beautiful and satisfying. To see the way the corners of the room meet or the light bounces off a floorboard is enough of a reason for life. Painters understand that the interesting object is the round glass, the box, the rusty down-pipe and that there is no need to reach for a meaning beyond what is visible. By their beauty, objects bring the eye of the beholder into contact with infinity.

There is another quality of ordinary mind, which is the interior of consciousness, the voices in the head, the shift of feeling and sensation. Yes, that's it, the voice in your head that says, "I don't have voices in my head." That one. Ordinary means that there is no need to add or take away from what is going on in the mind. Each portion of life has the whole of life. There is nothing wrong with what is in the mind except the sense that something is wrong. In this way simplicity turns to a form of compassion. When there is no objection to the states of mind that arise – ordinary or painful or thick – then

they have their moment and move along, like clouds in the trade winds. And there is no flaw in the thinker or in the moment that is taking place.

Ordinary mind is the Way.