

TO POLISH A TILE “*When you become you, Zen becomes Zen. When you are you, you see things as they are, and you become one with your surroundings.*”

Zen stories, or *koans*, are very difficult to understand before you know what we are doing moment after moment. But if you know exactly what we are doing in each moment, you will not find *koans* so difficult. There are so many *koans*. I have often talked to you about a frog, and each time everybody laughs. But a frog is very interesting. He sits like us, too, you know. But he does not think that he is doing anything so special. When you go to a zendo and sit, you may think you are doing some special thing. While your husband or wife is sleeping, you are practicing zazen! You are doing some special thing, and your spouse is lazy! That may be your understanding of zazen. But look at the frog. A frog also sits like us, but he has no idea of zazen. Watch him. If something annoys him, he will make a face. If something comes along to eat, he will snap it up and eat, and he eats sitting. Actually that is our zazen—not any special thing.

Here is a kind of frog *koan* for you. Baso was a famous Zen master called the Horse-master. He was the disciple of Nangaku, one of the Sixth Patriarch’s disciples. One day while he was studying under Nangaku, Baso was sitting, practicing zazen. He was a man of large physical build; when he talked, his tongue reached to his nose; his voice was loud; and his zazen must have been very good. Nangaku saw him sitting like a great mountain or like a frog. Nangaku asked, “What are you doing?” “I am practicing zazen,” Baso replied. “Why are you practicing zazen?” “I want to attain enlightenment; I want to be a Buddha,” the disciple said. Do you know what the teacher did? He picked up a tile, and he started to polish it. In Japan, after taking a tile from the kiln, we polish it to give it a beautiful finish. So Nangaku picked up a tile and started to polish it. Baso, his disciple, asked, “What are you doing?” “I want to make this tile into a jewel,” Nangaku said. “How is it possible to make a tile a jewel?” Baso asked.

“How is it possible to become a Buddha by practicing zazen?” Nangaku replied. “Do you want to attain Buddhahood? There is no Buddhahood besides your ordinary mind. When a cart does not go, which do you whip, the cart or the horse?” the master asked.

Nangaku’s meaning here is that whatever you do, that is zazen. True zazen is beyond being in bed or sitting in the zendo. If your husband or wife is in bed, that is zazen. If you think, “I am sitting here, and my spouse is in bed,” then even though you are sitting here in the cross-legged position, that is not true zazen. You should be like a frog always. That is true zazen.

Dogen-zenji commented on this *koan*. He said, “When the Horse-master becomes the Horse-master, Zen becomes Zen.” When Baso becomes Baso, his zazen becomes true zazen, and Zen becomes Zen. What is true zazen? When you become you! When you are you, then no matter what you do, that is zazen. Even though you are in bed, you may not be you most of the time. Even though you are sitting in the zendo, I wonder whether you are you in the true sense.

Here is another famous *koan*. Zuikan was a Zen master who always used to address himself. “Zuikan?” he would call. And then he would answer. “Yes!” “Zuikan?” “Yes!” Of course he was living all alone in his small zendo, and of course he knew who he was, but sometimes he lost himself. And whenever he lost himself, he would address himself, “Zuikan?” “Yes!”

If we are like a frog, we are always ourselves. But even a frog sometimes loses himself, and he makes a sour face. And if something comes along, he will snap at it and eat it. So I think a frog is always addressing himself. I think you should do that also. Even in zazen you will lose yourself. When you become sleepy, or when your mind starts to wander about, you lose yourself. When your legs become painful—“Why are my legs so painful?”—you lose yourself. Because you lose yourself, your problem will be a problem for you. If you do not lose yourself, then even though you have difficulty, there is actually no problem whatsoever. You just sit in the midst of the problem; when you are a part of the problem, or when the problem is

a part of you, there is no problem, because you are the problem itself. The problem is you yourself. If this is so, there is no problem.

When your life is always a part of your surroundings—in other words, when you are called back to yourself, in the present moment—then there is no problem. When you start to wander about in some delusion which is something apart from you yourself, then your surroundings are not real anymore, and your mind is not real anymore. If you yourself are deluded, then your surroundings are also a misty, foggy delusion. Once you are in the midst of delusion, there is no end to delusion. You will be involved in deluded ideas one after another. Most people live in delusion, involved in their problem, trying to solve their problem. But just to live is actually to live in problems. And to solve the problem is to be a part of it, to be one with it.

So which do you hit, the cart or the horse? Which do you hit, yourself or your problems? If you start questioning which you should hit, that means you have already started to wander about. But when you actually hit the horse, the cart will go. In truth, the cart and the horse are not different. When you are you, there is no problem of whether you should hit the cart or the horse. When you are you, zazen becomes true zazen. So when you practice zazen, your problem will practice zazen, and everything else will practice zazen too. Even though your spouse is in bed, he or she is also practicing zazen—when *you* practice zazen! But when you do not practice true zazen, then there is your spouse, and there is yourself, each quite different, quite separate from the other. So if you yourself have true practice, then everything else is practicing our way at the same time.

That is why we should always address ourselves, checking up on ourselves like a doctor tapping himself. This is very important. This kind of practice should be continued moment after moment, incessantly. We say, “When the night is here, the dawn comes.” It means there is no gap between the dawn and the night. Before the summer is over, autumn comes. In this way we should understand our life. We should practice with this understanding, and solve our problems in this way. Actually, just to work on the problem, if you do

it with single-minded effort, is enough. You should just polish the tile; that is our practice. The purpose of practice is not to make a tile a jewel. Just continue sitting; that is practice in its true sense. It is not a matter of whether or not it is possible to attain Buddhahood, whether or not it is possible to make a tile a jewel. Just to work and live in this world with this understanding is the most important point. That is our practice. That is true zazen. So we say, “When you eat, eat!” You should eat what is there, you know. Sometimes you do not eat it. Even though you are eating, your mind is somewhere else. You do not taste what you have in your mouth. As long as you can eat when you are eating, you are all right. Do not worry a bit. It means you are you yourself.

When you are you, you see things as they are, and you become one with your surroundings. There is your true self. There you have true practice; you have the practice of a frog. He is a good example of our practice—when a frog becomes a frog, Zen becomes Zen. When you understand a frog through and through, you attain enlightenment; you are Buddha. And you are good for others, too: husband or wife or son or daughter. This is zazen!