

ELEGANT FAILURE

A GUIDE TO

Zen Koans

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Chapter 18

Tou-shuai's Three Gates

Can you attach long or short to the journey?

Is the path wide or narrow?

Is this within time and space or not?

If you digest all of this, then what becomes clear?

Haabh!!

The whole world is one gate, why not come in?

Case 47 in the *Wu-men-kuan* (*Mumonkan*; *Mu Mun Kwan*) says:

Zen Master Tou-shuai made three gates to test his students.

Cutting ignorance grass and sitting Zen is wishing to see nature. Then where is your nature now?

You already understand your nature and pass beyond life and death. When you die, how then will you be reborn?

You already have freedom over life and death and also understand where you return to. When the four elements disperse, where do you go?¹

Those are Tou-shuai's Three Gates. Then Zen Master Wu-men (*Mumon*; *Mu Mun*) follows with this short poem:

Truly perceived one mind numberless kalpas
[cons].

Numberless kalpas, these are just now.

Just now see exploded one mind,

See exploded those who just now see.²

Wu-men also writes a commentary:

If you can utter three pivotal sayings here, you can be the master wherever you are; whatever circumstances you encounter are themselves the source. [That means in all situations you are in close contact with the essence, no matter what you are doing.] Otherwise [meaning if you have not yet reached this stage of development], it is easy to fill up on coarse food, hard to starve if you chew thoroughly.³

Another translation says, "Gulping down your food will fill you up quickly, while chewing well will make it more difficult to become hungry again."⁴ Clearly he is not talking about rice and beans and french fries here—he is talking about dharma food, sustaining spiritual food. If you get some experience quickly and just gulp it down, perhaps that won't sustain you for long. The essence of practice is slow chewing—slow development, slow cultivation, and slow unfolding.

Tou-shuai (Tosotsu; To Sal) was a Zen master who lived around the year 1000. In the lineage of Zen masters stemming from Lin-chi (Rinzai), he comes toward the end of what is considered the classical period of Zen in China. Because he died at the early age of forty-eight and left no successors, his teaching was not passed down to other teachers. We do, however, have his three gates through which we attempt to enter.

Each of the three gates is of great interest, but the gates should not be interesting to us just for the sake of philosophical knowledge. Rather, each one ought to inform our practice from moment to moment, from day to day.

Tou-shuai's first gate begins by saying, "Cutting ignorance grass and sitting Zen is wishing to see nature." This expression, cutting ignorance grass, literally refers to the hair one shaves off when one becomes a monk or a nun. It means that we are all very attached to appearance and the superficialities of life, and by clinging to appearances we miss something that is more fundamental. So when a monk or a nun shaves off their hair, they are saying, I want to cut my attachment to this narrow, limiting view of myself and perceive something more profound.

In the Zen tradition, you find images like grass, weeds, vines, and creepers. These are metaphors for our habit of getting wrapped up in fixed patterns of perception or behavior as we cling to what we consider to be our egos. For example, Zen Master Ching-ch'ing (Kyosei; Gyeong Cheong) said to a monk who had missed the point in what Ching-ch'ing was saying, "You too are a person caught up in the weeds," meaning that you are caught up in your ideas and don't see what is right in front of you. Actually, even the kong-an collections are often referred to as vines and creepers, suggesting that they might also make complications where originally everything was pure and simple.

In a broader sense, cutting ignorance grass has the connotation of cutting through delusion. That is why the second bodhisattva vow says, "Delusions are endless, I vow to cut through them all." In the case, Tou-shuai says, "Cutting ignorance grass and sitting Zen." Sitting Zen is one side of our practice, but if you think that practice is just sitting Zen, then you are attached to the formality of meditation. Tou-shuai is encouraging us to cut through ignorance and delusion moment by moment in every situation—not just while sitting. In the same way, when we are standing, we should see clearly; when we are eating, we should see clearly; when we are conversing, we should see clearly. Cut ignorance grass moment by moment and sit Zen.

Then he states that these two, cutting off ignorance and sitting

Zen, are wishing to see nature. This is a very important sentence. *Nature* here means our fundamental or essential nature. True nature and buddha nature are the same thing. There is an old saying, "Just seeing is buddha nature." Not that you are going to see buddha nature, but the very act of just seeing is buddha nature. When you just see, just hear, just sit, just walk, or just eat, then true nature is already manifested. The word *just* here is important. It sounds simple, but to become simple is not so simple.

Also here, "wishing to see nature" refers to aspiration, our aspiration, toward practice. Why practice? We aspire to perceive our true nature and to understand our correct job in the world. Sometimes we express this by telling ourselves to make a firm determination to attain enlightenment and help others. We frequently hear it said that at the very moment one gives rise to a sincere aspiration for practice, one has the first moment of enlightenment. That is why the phrase "Zen mind, beginner's mind" is so apt.

The term "beginner's mind" comes from the Hua Yen Sutra. The sutra tells a long story about a young pilgrim named Sudhana who goes seeking enlightenment from fifty-three different teachers. When he starts on his journey, the first teacher he comes to is Manjushri (Monju; Mun Su Sari), the Bodhisattva of Primal Wisdom. Manjushri then sends him on a journey to the other fifty-two teachers. After he has passed through all this refinement of practice, he again meets Manjushri. The meaning of this is clearly that where you begin is where you end. The path of practice is the expression of compassion and wisdom as they come together in our activity at the moment. Wishing to see true nature is to give rise to the kind of aspiration that sustains our practice and upon which our practice is based.

After asserting that cutting ignorance grass and sitting Zen is wishing to see nature, Tou-shuai challenges us: "Then where is your nature now?" How is it manifesting just now? This true nature is everything's true nature. It is something that we all share and participate in together. How that is expressing itself is unique and different moment by moment with each one of us. This is why Tou-shuai asks, "Where is your true nature just now? This is his first gate."

In the second gate, he goes further to state, "You already understand your nature and pass beyond life and death." You could say, first you understand, then you attain, then you digest and assimilate your understanding and attainment. Since you

already understand your true nature, you pass beyond life and death. What does it mean to pass beyond life and death? Some translations say, “You certainly are free from life and death.”⁵ Tou-shuai goes on to ask, “When you die, how then will you be reborn?”

Life, death, and rebirth: What do those terms mean? There are various ways to look at them. The purpose of the examination is not an intellectual pursuit but one that should strengthen your practice, for we all have to face the moment of death sometime. To pass beyond life and death means you transcend life and death. When you come to the moment before thought, you and the universe become one. To become one doesn't mean that before you weren't one and now you have become one (already from the beginning you were one with the universe), but at that moment you recognize that you and the universe are completely one, never separate. If you and the universe are already one, there is no life and no death. Life and death are like putting on your clothes in the morning and taking them off at night or driving your car for a long time until it won't go anymore and leaving it in the junk heap and getting a new car. Fundamentally there is no coming and no going. But lest you make the assumption that no coming or going means there must be something permanent, another sutra says, “No coming, no going, and no abiding.” That means no staying either.

Transcending life and death means in one sense transcending the distinctions we make, the artificial demarcation line we make between something we call life and something we call death. In the Zen tradition, to pass beyond something or to be free of it does not mean that you have escaped it—you don't go to the pure land or some heaven where there is no life or death. To transcend life and death means at the moment of life, there is just life, and at the moment of death, there is just death.

Sometimes in the Zen tradition we talk about life and death or birth and death as the moment-to-moment appearing and disappearing of things in our mind. If you sit meditation and watch your mind, you see that thinking comes, thinking goes, feeling arises, feeling passes away, sensation appears, sensation disappears. All this coming and going moment by moment is sometimes called birth and death. To pass beyond birth and death means to not be caught up and cling to the momentary forms of your mind's fluctuations. It also means you don't push them away or reject them. When you can just be with whatever is, moment by moment, you transcend life and death.

Also in Zen, life and death refers to holding and clinging versus letting go. There is a famous Zen saying: “The act of a great person is, when hanging over a cliff a thousand feet in the air, to let go.” You let go into open boundless being that is clear like space. Is that life or is that death? Sometimes what looks like death is becoming alive, and what looks like dying is being born. Also, to die refers to the moment when we let go of our small, contracted, egocentric view. At that moment, we achieve what is referred to as the Great Death, which means we have an enlightenment experience. In that experience, one side is like death, but the other side is like emerging into something new—rebirth.

In Zen poetry, you often find expressions such as:

Flowers bloom on a withered tree in a spring beyond
kalpas;
you ride a jade elephant backwards, chasing
a winged dragon-deer.⁶

The first line refers to death and rebirth: letting go of small self, becoming big self, open self, becoming more than you conceived of yourself as being.

I have a friend who is fond of the saying, “You're not just your story.” We tell ourselves a story about who and what we are so much of the time, and then we identify with that story line. We believe it and begin to fabricate a whole universe around ourselves to substantiate it. But when you come into the clarity of this moment, you recognize that you are not just your story—there is more to it than that. If you experience that kind of freedom, then being occurs without hindrance. In the Lotus Sutra, it says the Bodhisattva of Compassion appears in many different forms—man, woman, layperson, householder, monk, nun, dog, cat, demon. If you understand your true position, and you can connect with the situation moment by moment without holding on to your patterns, then you can adapt and appear according to what is needed.

In the early days of the Providence Zen Center, a small group of people lived in a house in the city with Zen Master Seung Sahn. It was in a very poor neighborhood. In this neighborhood lived a boy around eight years of age who would periodically sneak through the window of the Zen Center and pilfer things. One day Zen Master Seung Sahn was in the garden when this little boy appeared. Suddenly Seung Sahn howled loudly and charged at the boy. The boy was petrified and ran away.

Later one of the students said to the Zen master, “I don’t know if that was the right kind of action to do.” Seung Sahn replied, “Sometimes a demon is necessary.” His point was that he saved the boy from being a thief by scaring him away. When you die, how will you be reborn? Not just when you leave this body, but moment by moment how will you manifest yourself according to situations, according to circumstances, according to time and place, and how will you supply what is needed?

This whole notion of dying and being reborn brings up the issues of karma and reincarnation, which are fascinating subjects for some people when they first come in contact with Buddhism. If, however, you are too focused on the notion of reincarnation and rebirth, then the focus of your practice may lean into the future, rather than being directed toward this moment.

Many stories about death are told in the Zen tradition. You can read stories where a Zen master announces to the assembly, “Tomorrow I’ll be leaving you.” The next day he puts on his robes, shaves his head, sits up in meditation, and quietly dies. But there is also a story of Zen Master Lung-t’an (Ryutan; Yong Dam) who, when he was dying, repeatedly yelled out in agony on his deathbed. His students tried to ease his pain in some way. One version of the story claims that he kept shouting, “It hurts! It hurts!” and so the students tried to stop his pain. Lung-t’an stopped his yells and said, “Don’t think that my agony now is in any way different from what my joy and exuberance was.” Then he died.

A man said to Zen Master Bankei, “I’m getting on in years. What kind of preparation should I make for my death?” Bankei replied, “No preparation is necessary.” The man was surprised because the common Buddhist viewpoint would be that you practice something to get ready for your death. Often laypeople in East Asian countries repeat the name of the Pure Land buddha, Na Mu Amita Bul, to get ready for death. But Bankei said, “No preparation is necessary.” So the man asked why, to which Bankei stated, “When you die, just die.” This is Bankei’s practice connected with death and rebirth.

Tou-shuai’s third gate says, “You already have freedom over life and death and also understand where you return to.” If you can be reborn in the moment according to circumstances, letting go of self-centered ideas and becoming one with the situation, then you have complete freedom. Moment by moment, everything reveals true nature. Emerging and returning are only superficial changes. As is stated in the Heart

Sutra, essentially there is no origination. The process of coming from and returning to is called nature origination. This is why Tou-shuai asks, “Where is your nature now?”

“You understand where you return to. When the four elements disperse, where do you go?” The four elements, according to ancient Indian ideas, are earth, water, fire, and air. From a narrow viewpoint, the four elements mean your physical body, so when your physical body falls apart, where do you go? But the four elements appear in gross and subtle form—we all are constructing our own versions of reality moment by moment and making them out of elements of imagination. When you cut through delusion and the clinging quality of opinion, conception, and idea, at that moment—*ptchh*—the elements disperse. At that point, where do you go? What is your direction? What is your true job? Tou-shuai encourages us to see, perceive, and practice that.

Zen Master Wu-men’s poem connected with the kong-an says:

Truly perceived one mind numberless kalpas.
Numberless kalpas, these are just now.
Just now see exploded one mind,
See exploded those who just now see.

The language of Zen Master Seung Sahn’s translation is somewhat unusual. A different translation, given by Japanese Roshi Shibayama, elucidates the kong-an a little differently:

This one instant, as it is, is an infinite
number of kalpas.
An infinite number of kalpas are at the same
time this
one instant.
If you see into this fact,
The True Self which is seeing has been seen
into.⁷

If you grasp this moment, then you grasp just what you are. This poem is based on the philosophy of the Hua Yen Sutra, but it is very practice oriented, because what is emphasized is moment, this instant, just now. Moment means experiencing something wholly and completely. At that point, there is just this moment, no coloration by some idea of the past through memory, no coloration by some imagined sense of what the

future is going to bring, but just wholly and completely doing something now, at this instant.

We operate in two kinds of time, but unfortunately we usually only identify and relate to one of them. There is chronological time, with past, present, and future, which we use as demarcations. But where is the past? Where is the present? Where is the future? It is something like watching action on a film strip move from the past to the present to the future. If, however, we look at just one frame, that one mind instant, that one frame of experience just now is complete. Each frame is a complete picture and is related to everything that has preceded it. It also contains everything that will emerge out of it. Without thinking of past or future, in that moment we become completely unified. We just do something. We just act completely. Unfortunately we usually identify ourselves with notions of past, present, and future. But when we bring past, present, and future into our activity, our activity is never clean and complete—it is always colored or tainted.

8] A friend of mine once sat a retreat with Robert Aitken Roshi in Hawaii. One day, as the bell was hit to end the sitting period, when one is expected to stand up for walking meditation, Aitken Roshi said, “Now, get up and walk with nothing sticking to it.” Nothing sticking to it means moment time—don’t drag along some memory with you as you walk just now. That is a very important point for practice, because if you look at practice as having past, present, and future, then you can also make comparisons such as, “Yesterday my meditation was pretty good; today it didn’t feel so good. Maybe tomorrow it’ll be better, and next week I’ll get enlightenment.” Bringing in these ideas orients your practice toward getting someplace (which is not the place you are now) at some time in the future, or attaining some state that is different from your most immediate state. That becomes a big obstacle to just being and expressing yourself. That is why the Buddha said, “From the beginning, each and every thing already has the awakened nature.” He did not say that you will get somewhere sometime, as if practices will manufacture the awakened nature.

If you don’t generate time as an idea, then you just act completely. Just sitting, just questioning, just walking, whatever you’re doing is not colored by ideation. Practice should be rooted there. In truth, the only freedom we have is there, because as soon as you have an idea of past and future and somewhere to get to, you can never be free. You are always bound by some attempt to move toward something that you are not now. But at the point

when you are being in this moment, cleanly and clearly, you find true freedom—not freedom to get away from something or to get away with something but the true freedom of your essential being. At the moment that you act cleanly and clearly you perceive the true relationship of things and understand your connection to the immediate situation.

A poem that is read during the death ceremony in the Korean Zen tradition distills many of the essential points of Hua Yen philosophy:

In one is all
In many is one
One is identical to all
Many is identical to one
In one dust particle is contained the ten directions
And so it is with all particles of dust
Incalculably long eons are identical to a single thought
instant
A single thought instant is identical to incalculably long
eons
The nine times and the ten directions are mutually
identical
Yet are not confused or mixed but function separately
The moment one begins to aspire with their heart
Instantly perfect enlightenment is attained
Samsara and nirvana are always harmonized together.

Someone asked Zen Master Pai-chang (Hyakujo; Baek Jang), “Does the enlightened person come under cause and effect or not?” Pai-chang said, “Cause and effect are not obscured. Cause and effect are clear.” It is important to see that past, present, and future are not obscured. Equally important is to see that this moment of freedom is also not obscured.

Notes

1. See Seung Sahn, trans., *The Mu Mun Kwan* (Cumberland, RI: Kwan Um School of Zen, 1983), 55.
2. Ibid.
3. Thomas Cleary, trans., *No Barrier* (New York: Bantam, 1993), 204.
4. Koun Yamada, trans., *The Gateless Gate* (Boston: Wisdom, 2004), 220.
5. Zenkei Shibayama, *The Gateless Barrier* (Boston: Shambhala, 2000), 316.
6. Robert Aitken, *The Morning Star* (Washington, DC: Shoemaker & Hoard, 2003), 152.
7. Shibayama, 316 