

At the End of the Line Is No Line

Zen Master Wu Kwang (Richard Shrobe)

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Zen Master Wu Kwang: For those of you who are here for the first time, this is not a formally organized talk. Usually we have a question-answer-discussion format. Tonight, though, I do have a few poems that were sent to me by Ken Kessel, Ji Do Poep Sa Nim [*now Zen Master Jok Um —Ed.*]. Ken, as most of you know, is one of the teachers in the Kwan Um Zen School and was for a long time a resident teacher in New York. He took to writing poetry some years ago and whenever he leads a retreat he writes a series of poems, one for each student on the retreat. Right after one student leaves the interview room and before he rings the bell for the next student, he writes a short poem trying to capture something of the essence of the person as he felt them to present themselves in the interview, or of the interchange between them. This series of poems comes from the New Haven retreat of January 20, 2007. He usually includes the names of the people he writes the poems for, but in this series, he omitted them. So I'll read some of them and then perhaps we'll talk about them.

At the end
Of the line
Is no line
No line
Has no end
No end
Has no hindrance
Leaves fall in Autumn
Snow in Winter

No eyes
No ears
No nose
Who cares
Vaster
Than anyone knows
Sunlight dancing
On Autumn leaves

What we have
Isn't what we think
It is
Close
Close
Close
Look!
Didja see?

Here's one for just now:

Great joy
Great joy
Snow
Melt
Flower
Breeze
Ahhhhh

Nowhere to go
Why can't escape
Sentient beings
Are waiting
Shhhh
Listen

Fiercely gentle
Intensely relaxed
Dangerously stable
Breathe in
Breathe out

Simple
Simple
Like touching
Your nose
When washing
Your face

The great flood
Swallows everything
All fish attain
The place
Of no water

Where is the distinction
Where is the distinction
People killing people
In this whole world
Where is the distinction

So the first poem says, "At the end / Of the line / Is no line / No line / Has no end / No end / Has no hindrance / Leaves fall in Autumn / Snow in Winter."

Part of this is similar to a section of the Heart Sutra: "Form is emptiness. Emptiness is form. Form is not different from emptiness. Emptiness is not different from form." Here it says, "At the end of the line / Is no line." So there's form; there's a line. But at the end of the line, if you get to the end of the line, then

there's no line. If you take the train out to Brooklyn, to New Lots Avenue, that's it. There's nothing there after that. At the end of the line is no line. But then the second permutation of "Form is emptiness; emptiness is form" is "no form; no emptiness." If form truly is empty and emptiness truly is form then those designators don't really apply to anything. Why say "form"? Why say "emptiness"? No form; no emptiness. So he says, "No line has no end." The first part says, "At the end of the line is no line," but the second says, "No line has no end." Also no beginning. No beginning, no end. No coming, no going. No purity, no impurity. No line has no end. But then he goes one step further: "No end has no hindrance."

There's a short poem that comes from the Avatamsaka Sutra. It appears in the *Compass of Zen* that we use. "If you want to understand the realm of Buddhas, keep a mind that is clear like space." So a mind that is clear like space has no line and no end, no opinion, no conception, not holding anything, not making anything. So if you want to understand the realm of Buddhas, keep a mind that is clear like space. Let all thinking and all desires, all conceptualizing and all grasping, fall far away, and let your mind go anywhere with no hindrance. So the mind of no hindrance, the no end that has no hindrance, is the bodhisattva way. If you have no hindrance then you can connect with anything. Then compassion arises freely and easily in interaction because you're not hindering, you're not holding back, you're not interfering with the free flow of give and take. No end has no hindrance; you're not impeding anything. The first three of our four great bodhisattva vows are: "Sentient beings are numberless; we vow to save them all. Delusions are endless; we vow to cut through them all. The teachings are infinite; we vow to learn them all." Because if you're not thinking of an end, an end result or an end gain of some kind, then there's freedom; there's no hindrance. You don't care. There's just living your life and being helpful in any way you can. Someone is hungry, you give them something to eat. No end. Not looking for an end. Even with practice: "What am I going to get from practice?" If you let go of having some gaining idea, an end gain, then there is no hindrance, no problem.

And with that mind, you clearly perceive the last two lines of the poem, "Leaves fall in Autumn. Snow in Winter." There's a poem after one of the kong-ans in the Mumonkan, a famous interchange between Joju and his teacher, Nam Cheon. Joju at this time is a young student. He approaches Nam Cheon and asks, "What is the true way?" Nam Cheon responds, "Everyday mind is the path." Joju asks like a good beginning student, "Should I try to keep it or not?" Nam Cheon says, "If you try, you're already mistaken." So Joju is really confused and says, "If I don't try, how can I attain the true way?" Nam Cheon retorts, "The true way is not

dependent on understanding or not understanding. Understanding is illusion; (If you think you're going to grasp something with mental concepts, that's an illusion.) Not understanding is blankness. (But here "not understanding" does not mean "don't know" or "don't understand." Here it just means being in a torpid state of mind.) Not understanding is blankness. If you completely attain the true way of no thinking (not grasping, not holding, not attaching, not making anything, the true way of no thinking), then it's clear like space. So why do you make right and wrong?" Suddenly Joju woke up; he attained something. That's the kong-an. After the kong-an there is a short, four-line poem by Zen Master Mumon. "Flowers in springtime, moon in autumn / cool breeze in summer, snow in winter. / If you don't make anything in your mind / for you it's a good season." So here Ken's last two lines, "No end / Has no hindrance / Leaves fall in Autumn / Snow in Winter."

The next one to some degree is also based on the Heart Sutra. In the Heart Sutra it says, "No eyes, no ears, no nose, no tongue, no body, no mind; no color, no sound, no smell, no taste, no touch, no object of mind; no realm of eyes and so forth until no realm of mind consciousness." Those are all delineations of our experience of the world through the various senses and how we ordinarily are dualistically oriented. There's the seer and, over there, the seen. There's the hearer and, over there, what's heard, and so on. But the Heart Sutra gradually takes away each one of those: no eyes, no ears, no nose, no tongue, no body, no mind. The sutra also takes away the objects: no color, no sound, no smell, no taste, no touch, no object of mind. Object of mind means thoughts, things that go on in the mind. No realm of eyes refers to the consciousness that would recognize color. In the same way, no realm of ears refers to the consciousness that recognizes sound. When the bell is heard—bong . . . [*pauses for a moment*] So the Heart Sutra takes away each one until finally it gets to "and no attainment with nothing to attain." That's like "no end with no hindrance." But here he starts by

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saying, “No eyes, no ears, no nose.” He starts with the delineation of the Heart Sutra. He says, “No eyes, no ears, no nose. Who cares?” That’s a slap in the face to formal Buddhism. Then he says, “Vaster than anyone knows / sunlight dancing on autumn leaves.” So the second half of the poem, that’s the realization of “No eyes, no ears, no nose.” “No eyes” doesn’t literally mean that there are no eyes; “no ears” doesn’t literally mean there are no ears. A Japanese Zen master said, “These ears were originally just two flaps of skin.” That means if there is no consciousness that recognizes sound, then there are no ears. That’s one version of no ears. But the complete version of no ears means when you hear the bell ring, there’s just—bong. When you see sunlight dancing on autumn leaves, there’s just [*softly*] “Ohhhhh.”

Does anyone have a comment or a question?

Question: “Who cares?” also has a double meaning.

ZMWK: What is the double meaning?

Q: Who cares? Who is it that cares?

ZMWK: Yes, that’s right. Who is the one who cares?

And then he says “Vaster than anyone knows.” Because if you ask sincerely, “Who is the one who cares about all this?” then you’re left with . . . [*pauses for a moment*] There’s no knowing at that point. It’s just not knowing. Not knowing is quite vast. What you know is quite small. What you don’t know is quite wide and open. It covers galaxies and galaxies. Vaster than anyone knows, but the vastness of the universe at that moment is “sunlight dancing on autumn leaves.”

The third poem says, “What we have / Isn’t what we think / It is / Close / Close / Close / Look! / Didja see?” So “What we have / Isn’t what we think / It is.” Again, he’s playing with the phrase “It is.” “What we have isn’t what we think it is.” The other way is “What we have isn’t what we think. It is close, close, close.” “Look!” That’s an injunction, encouragement. If you look and see clearly then that is wisdom. If you don’t see clearly then that is ignorance. You’re ignoring something. Out of ignoring something usually we begin to grasp at something that we think is going to make us better some-

how, feel better, and we get angry or reject what we think is going to take something away from us, bother us.

“Great joy / Great joy / Snow / Melt / Flower / Breeze / Ahhhhh.” I don’t think that needs any commentary. [*laughter*]

Q: That’s not polar-bear consciousness. It’s very limited.

ZMWK: Do you want to say a little more? [*laughter*] Being of the polar bear clan yourself. [*laughter*]

Q: There you go.

ZMWK: What do you mean, sir?

Q: This is like and dislike.

ZMWK: Like and dislike?

No. Great joy, Great joy. Not joy as compared with sorrow. Snow. Melt. Flower. Breeze. Where’s like and dislike? Or as Joju said, “you bumpkin, you.”

Q: Sounds like you’re talking from experience.

ZMWK: Exactly.

Talking about this last part, “Ahhhhh.” Once I was in the Museum of Modern Art. I was walking through looking at different paintings. I turned and there was a small painting by Jackson Pollock called “White Light.” I turned the corner and “Ahhhhh,” I just stood there transfixed—looking.

“Nowhere to go / Why can’t escape / Sentient beings / Are waiting / Shhhh / Listen.” That is an encapsulation of the bodhisattva path and bodhisattva ideal. Years ago there was a program on the radio every Sunday morning called “In the Spirit.” It was moderated by Lex Hixon, who was quite an avid practitioner of Zen and a few other traditions as well. He died of cancer some years ago. Every Sunday he would have someone on the program who he would interview. Zen Master Seung Sahn was on there many times. One particular time Roshi Bernie Glassman was the guest. This was shortly after Bernie Glassman had come from Maezumi Roshi’s Zen Center in Los Angeles and opened his own center here in Yonkers. Bernie gave an example of what he thought the bodhisattva ideal was. He said, “A bodhisattva is a person like this: There is a well that needs filling. It’s dry and the only implement that the bodhisattva has is a teaspoon and the only supply of water is a snow-capped mountain far away. So this person goes with the teaspoon and gets one teaspoon of snow and brings it back and—*ptchb*—puts it in the well. Then he goes again.” Now that’s a thankless task and from a certain viewpoint, pretty stupid. But from the standpoint of the bodhisattva ideal where no end is no hindrance and where there is nowhere to escape to, because we are all in this together, raising the mind of bodhi—the mind of wisdom—to make a firm decision to attain enlightenment

and help others. Those two together are the bodhisattva ideal. Not just to attain enlightenment myself but to attain enlightenment and help others. So from that viewpoint there is nowhere to escape to. Enlightenment is not some escape because enlightenment means I wake up to the fact that we are all interconnected. So “Nowhere to go / Why can't escape / Sentient beings are waiting / Shhhh / Listen.” They're waiting.

Today I was waiting for the bus and near the bus stop was a bar with a happy hour. It was one of those bars where the front windows open up and you can hear everything that's going on. A few people had spilled out onto the street, and by the sound of their voices and the level of decibels, they had already chugged down a few tall ones. And I was thinking to myself, “This is their Friday night and this is our Friday night. What is possessing people to do that?” And then I also remembered when I used to do that. So sentient beings are waiting. Shhhh. Listen.

And of course the image of the bodhisattva of compassion is intimately connected with listening. In Chinese, Korean and Japanese the name of the bodhisattva means the one who hears the sounds of the world. Perceive universal sound—perceive the sounds of the universe. So if you listen then you can be attuned and you can resonate with it, but if you're not listening, then you're in the realm of absurdity. Nothing makes sense and you can't hear anything. You can't let anything in or out. Here just as before in another poem where he exhorted everyone to “Look!”—here he exclaims “Shhhh / Listen.”

You could see the next poem as a reference to formal meditation. Or it could go beyond just formal meditation. It's a nice encapsulation. It says, “Fiercely gentle / Intensely relaxed / Dangerously stable / Breathe in / Breathe out.” Fiercely gentle. What is fierce gentleness? What is the intensity of relaxation? And what does it mean to be dangerously stable? A gyroscope is dangerously stable. From the standpoint of Zen and Buddhism there is nothing fixed. Everything is dangerously stable, because there is nothing to hold on to. Each thing is—*ptchh!*—flashing into its fullness. So dangerously stable. Breathe in. Breathe out. Breathe in and breathe out. Breathe in; breathe out. Without making anything, without attaching to anything, without holding anything. Then the fierce gentleness arises. The intensely relaxed condition arises and you will find your stability in the midst of dangerousness.

But “breathe in breathe out” doesn't just mean [*loudly inhales and exhales*]. “Breathe in” means inspire. Take in what's in front of you. And “Breathe out” means let go and connect. If we live from that point of view, moment by moment, as much as we are able, then there's fierce gentleness and intense relaxedness and dangerous stability. “Simple / Simple / Like touching / Your nose / When washing / Your face.” It's all very simple. So why am I talking so much then?

For two reasons: First I'm reminding myself over and over again that it really is simple, simple like touching your nose when washing your face. And I'm also doing my job and reminding all of you. Sometimes I get worried that none of us quite remembers this.

Q: It's easy to get your face dirty again.

ZMWK: Yes.

“The great flood / Swallows everything / All fish attain / The place / Of no water.” Where is the place of no water? A Zen poem says, “Fish don't know the water; birds don't know the sky.” Another poem says, “Birds fly, feathers fall. Fish swim, the water gets muddy.” So in this world, swimming in the ocean of life and death, the water gets muddy. And even in the vast openness of the sky, still feathers fall.

His last poem: “Where is the distinction / Where is the distinction / People killing people / In this whole world / Where is the distinction”

Questions? Answers?

Q: What is the word *distinction* referring to?

ZMWK: What do you think it's referring to?

Q: It's referring to making opposites.

ZMWK: Yes.

Q: So any opposite? Because it's a very general word. All opposites?



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ZMWK: Yes, that's true, but it depends on how you want to take the line "People killing people." If you want to take it quite literally like the situations we seeing going on right now, or "As soon as you make distinctions, people are killing people." You are killing your true personhood as soon as you make distinctions. That's why the third ancestor's poem says, "The great way is not difficult. Only don't make distinctions." But there is a problem when countries and races and ethnic groups make distinctions and then get caught by the distinctions. What's inside my sphere is good, correct, right, on God's side, and so on, and what's over there is a threat. And from that, people kill people and then it raises the question "In this whole world where is the distinction?" The great way is not difficult. Only don't make distinctions. That doesn't mean don't see that the wall is white and the floor is brown. It means don't get caught by that.

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Q: Isn't he making a play on Joju's poem where he says "Country bumpkin where's the distinction?" I know he liked that kong-an. I have a feeling he is playing with that because it's very different within that context than in the way Joju used it.

ZMWK: He's taking a line from there, just like this other one, "Simple, simple, simple like touching your nose when washing your face." That comes from Layman Pang and his family. There is some set of interchanges where one of them says, "Practice is very difficult," and he gives some analogy. Then the other one says, "No it's not difficult, it's very simple. It's just like touching your nose when washing your face." The third one says, "Not easy, not difficult" and gives another image. You can see his roots in the Zen tradition in these poems, in how he uses Zen poetics in ways he wants to. Which is a kind of maturity to be able to use your influences in the way you want to.

Q: I have a question that I've been carrying around. It pertains to the last poem and I guess it appeals to you both in your Zen master hat and your psychotherapist hat: There are a couple of places in our formal teachings where it says there are actions and you have to mind your actions, but even thought processes are things that have a reality to them so if you have these negative thoughts toward them then maybe it is something you should look at. Years ago I heard Dr. Cornel West speak. He was sort of just ad-libbing, but he came to a point that he and a lot of other speakers from all backgrounds have made, specifically talking about race. He said you always have to be aware of racism within you. (It was a predominantly white audience, just to give some context.) He said, "I



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know there is a little bit of a racist in you because I know there is a little bit of a racist in me." It was a very powerful statement, first sounding like he was pointing the finger, but then saying "Hey no, no: Me." So I've carried that around, and more and more you hear all these people talk and fewer and fewer people say that they think they are racist and yet there is still something. So it's been a big, long, ongoing meditation, and I find that the more I look the more I find that things work on a cognitive level that is way beyond my consciousness, down to the point where I'll see something, some people, and have these impulses. I have these thoughts. Or maybe I'll feel a certain way after I see a certain person. My question to you is: Our practice would initially say, "Be aware of it; let it pass through." But on another level—this is where maybe as a psychotherapist you can help me—what are your thoughts about how to confront that? Is there any active way other than just being open and trying our best to take in each person as they come with an open mind? Is there, maybe not a technique, but perhaps some mindful way of dealing with that?

ZMWK: Well, that's what you just said: if you're cultivating awareness and looking, then you will keep in touch with that. That was his point. His point seems to be don't go to sleep on that fact and many other facts that are divisive. Of course Cornel West, for those of you who don't know him is, a Christian theologian. I forget from what sect, some Protestant sect, and he's a professor, these days at Princeton, used to be at Harvard. Very bright guy, and he usually comes from some point of religious humanism. So it doesn't surprise me that he would first challenge the audience and then say, "Yeah, I know I have it." There is some line that Jesus says in the Sermon on the Mount about seeing the mote in your own eye as well as in somebody else's eye. So that's an encouragement to "Look!" Don't go to sleep on these things. Stay active, stay awake. That's enough. I'm sure you could devise some techniques that would bring that up in some dramatic form, but I don't know that you need to do that. ♦