

The Mountain Is Green and the River Is Flowing

Zen Master Ji Kwang (Roland Wöhrle-Chon)

An old man is sitting opposite me. He smells rather strongly. The passengers next to me change their seats. I deliberately remain seated. The man drinks from a bottle of high-proof liquor and offers me a sip. I decline politely. It is obvious that the man is lonely and is looking for contact. He begins to talk: I learn that he has no home, but once he had a profession and loved a woman. And in the city, somewhere, there are his kids, whom he has not seen in a very long time. Because then everything turned out differently . . . I listen to him, ask a question sometimes, expressing appreciation for the magic tricks that he clumsily tries to demonstrate using his hands and fingers. It used to be his hobby, he tells me. It is important that one has a hobby, he calls out to everyone who enters the S-Bahn train. He wants to go to Schönefeld now, but it really doesn't matter. He then rides together with me until my stop. Before I step off, we kindly say goodbye to each other. I realize that I admire him because of his unconcern. He is a man like any other, with a history, with longings and plans, with laughter and sadness.

What is this, being human? We all say: "I." But do we understand this I? In nature, everything and anything has its job. The tiger, the snake, the flower . . . everyone understands his job. Only humans seem not to know why we came into this world. And so we search forever, for ourselves, for our destiny or fulfillment; for generally accepted rules and norms; for the reasons, possibilities and origins; and time and again for the meaning of living and of dying; for explanations, meaning and love—everyone in his own way. Some want to change the world. Others strive for amusements and consumption. Some of us settle for nice words or scientific theories. Some fall in love with the search and stay searchers. Others forget what provoked their search and what they wanted to search for. And still others don't want anything. Then there are the big attachments—sleep, food, money, fame and sex—that entangle us with life and that concern us all, about which we ask and search all over again. A wise man once said, "The mountain is the mountain and the river is the river." Undoubtedly true. It is a clear reflection of truth. But how does it occur? How does it function, and what does the experience of this truth mean in action?

Is it sufficient to say, "A watermelon is a watermelon"? If one wants to know what a watermelon is, then

one has to take a knife, cut the melon up and eat a piece: "Ahhh lovely! So that is a watermelon."

Bite—listen—just doing what needs to be done! For this we need to arrive at ourselves in this precise moment. This can only succeed when nothing stands in between: no good, no bad, no preferences or aversions. Then the mountain is the mountain and the river the river. In the moment, come back to yourself and recognize: everything is always complete. What could be missing? If this moment is clear, and the next one, too, and then the next one again . . . then our life becomes clear: the situation, our relationship to the situation and our function. Living and acting come into accord with reality. Inside and outside become one. Then the mountain is not only the mountain, and the river not only the river, but a clear reflection of truth in us becomes the experience of truth in us: the mountain is green and the river flows. And so, when we meet a person in need, then we try to help. In Zen we call this great compassion or the great bodhisattva way.

We see this in the last of the ten oxherding pictures: "With chest exposed he comes barefoot to the market. Covered in dirt and smeared with ash he broadly laughs all over his face. Without refuge in mystic powers, he brings leafless trees quickly to bloom."

To be in the market with open hands, to do what needs to be done, means to help where help is needed. The bodhisattva has jumped from the big No into the big Yes. He is not dwelling in the original unity of emptiness, which overcomes multiplicity and contrariness, and that makes up the nature of the bodhisattva, but rather in the essence of the experience of this connecting and uniting that lives between the separated and what is possible, and becomes alive in him. The world's focal point is this one point, which is nothing else besides the other person, and therefore the entire world with all beings. "The mountain is green and the river flows" becomes the expression of great love, great compassion and the great bodhisattva way. It means being—being together—being for one another.

We find the reality of great compassion not only in the biographies of Buddha, Jesus, Gandhi or Mother Theresa—and many others whose names cannot be mentioned here—but potentially in each and every one of us. We can create conditions that enable us to face each other fearlessly, open and emphatic: with open hands. ♦