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[Last updated: 26 April 1993]

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"MUMONKAN CASE 5" - a provisional title of  
an originally untitled teisho.  
This text addresses some of the most fundamental and delicate religious  
issues.  
Therefore, it should be read, quoted and analysed in a mindful way.  
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TEISHO

John Tarrant Roshi  
Zazenkai  
September 13, 1992, Oakland, California

This is from the Mumonkan, the koan collection. This is the  
Fifth Case of that collection. It's called "Hsiang-yen: Up a  
Tree".

The priest Hsiang-yen said, "It is as though you were up in  
a tree, hanging from a branch with your teeth. Your hands  
and feet can't touch any branch. Someone appears beneath  
the tree and asked, 'What is the meaning of Bodhidharma's  
coming from the West?' If you do not answer, you evade your  
responsibility. If you do answer, you lose your life. What  
do you do?"

Wu-men has a comment here.

Even if your eloquence flows like a river, it is all in  
vain. Even if you can expound cogently upon the whole body  
of Buddhist literature, that too is useless. If you can  
respond to this dilemma properly, you give life to those who  
have been dead and kill those who have been alive. If you  
can't respond, you must wait and ask Maitreya about it.

Wu-men's verse.

Hsiang-yen is just blabbing nonsense;  
his poisonous intentions are without limit.  
He stops up everyone's mouths,  
making his whole body the eye of a demon.

Please sit comfortably.

Hsiang-yen was an old Chinese teacher, probably around the Ninth  
Century of our era. There are a couple of interesting things  
about his history. He was an intellectual, intelligent person  
who studied with Kway-shan (sp?) who was a great teacher of his

era. He really couldn't quite grasp what his teacher was saying. He had a conversation with his teacher and his teacher said, "Well, you're very smart but you don't understand life. So I suggest you take up this koan and tell me, "Who were you before your parents were born. Hsiang-yen was stopped by this bizarre question. He went off into his room and looked through all the notes he had made through the years. (A good reasonable technique. The answer must be here somewhere.) But he couldn't find anything that would help him and so he went back to his teacher several times trying to extract the answer from his teacher. His teacher said, "I could tell you, but afterwards you would blame me for it." I think of this time as being the time when he was hanging from the tree the koan spoke about--as if he were hanging off a cliff.

He gave up. He had heard there was a great old teacher.

had been active. He decided, "I will just live a simple life and I will go and keep the garden around the tomb and live a life that has some sort of simple reverence and piety, although I know it's not the real life. I just can't do any better. He did that for years. (I'm not sure how long.) But for quite some time he was there and just living a very simple life. He had given up trying to walk The Way in the way in he had originally intended to. He couldn't quite do that. He just

a very deep moment when you just have to be hopeful. I fancy he became rather serene, actually from that. What else could he say? There was no hope for him. But he didn't give up completely. He didn't go out and kill himself or dissipate his life in some way. He decided to do something simple that he could do. He was sweeping the garden one day and a stone flew up from his broom and hit a bamboo and went "tock". That wonderful sound. And at that moment he heard the sound as if for the first time and his whole universe opened up. And he understood the whole of the teachings. This was a great moment for him and for him it came all in a rush. As if there were ice and all along it had been melting from underneath, but you couldn't see it until one day the ice was gone.

He composed a poem, and the poem was

One tock! and I have forgotten all that I knew.

It's one of the great lines of zen, I think. Sometimes it's said that in zen we just become blind, really blind. You start out with false blindness and end up with true blindness. Because you are blind to the things that deluded you. You forget the things that obsessed you and persecuted you and the sufferings. It's there and it's all marvelous in its own way. Everybody knows that phenomenon of the things that were so hard for us when we were a certain age, a certain time in our life when we look back seem rather rich and interesting. We can dine out on the stories. But this is something even more penetrating. He really did forget.

He said another interesting thing. His next line is

No artificial discipline was ever needed. (no effort)  
In every movement, I uphold the ancient Way

So we always start out with a sense of struggle, and most of us do in meditation because it doesn't immediately seem natural to our lives to meditate and sit still. We're always wiggling--attention deficit. The human being is an attention deficit creature. So we have a sense of going against something in our nature, of subduing something. And it is good to struggle a

little. But he is pointing out that, really, when the mind is clear there is no struggle. If we completely let go to what is and become truly present, we don't have that wrestling match going on.

No discipline is ever needed.  
In every movement, I uphold the ancient Way.

He also said

Wherever I walk, no traces are left,  
and my senses are not fettered by rules of conduct.  
Everywhere those who have found this truth  
declare it to be the best.

So he went along to his teacher, who was pleased, but his teacher had a great student called Yang-shan who said, "Bah! I don't believe this. I'm not sure your experience is real." So sometimes we can have an experience in meditation that is very persuasive, but it doesn't last and we need to keep going. So Yang-san pressed him, this newly enlightened person who was so pleased with what he could see, his enlightenment, and asked him for something more. Hsiang-yen immediately came out with another poem, he said

Last year's poverty was not true poverty.

(Last year I thought I was poor, but I was only miserable.)

this year is the real thing.

(I thought I was blind before, but now I am really blind.)

Last year a fine gimlet could find a place;  
this year even the gimlet is gone.

Yang-shan was a kind of hard person to please and said, "Well, that's really as good as the buddha, but it's not really as good as zen." He was sort of pushing. He wasn't completely sure that this person was the real thing. Hsiang-yen didn't have a fit or anything, he just gave him another poem and he said,

I have a single potential;  
that can be seen in a blink of an eye.  
If you still don't understand,  
call the newest person in the zendo and ask him about  
it.

And with this Yang-shan was happy.

As a teacher, in this poem he emphasized that moment of darkness and difficulty and suffering in just hanging there from the tree. When doubt takes us over, when an obsession fills our lives. There's nothing like a good obsession to zen. That thing where you are arguing with somebody in your head proving that you're right or proving that they should have done this or how they didn't love you enough. Whatever it is. We've all experienced this. It just goes on and on in our lives. And finally, we come down to even if we're right, what are we doing arguing in our heads like this, chasing after, making shadows. We are living in the ghost world fighting with the demons there.

But we all do it. Everybody in this room does this sometimes. He is showing us at that moment, in a sense when we become aware that--and I think our awareness starts to creep in. Sometimes when we become aware it's worse for awhile.

Ikkyu, the great old Japanese zen teacher who was an eccentric teacher, was asked the essence of zen and he said, "Attention, attention, attention." Zen always depends on attention. Really, that's enough, that will get us through. However, when we attend sometimes we notice how much pain we're in and there really is that sense of hanging from a branch and seeing that you can't reach anything. It's a metaphor of--the literal minded part of me always wants to grab this thing and hang from it, but there is some sense in which we are stuck and hanging in the world.

One of the very curious things about human beings is that human beings seek such situations, I think. You will find that if there is a situation that gives you great difficulty, you'll find yourself going back to it again and again. This is why a friend's good advice is always true, but doesn't help. If you tell somebody--if they come to you with a problem and you say, "Oh yes, I have that problem, why don't you do this?" They'll give you ten reasons why they can't. And that's good, I think. We need to find our own thread through, our own route through. But when you come back, it really helps when you come back to that difficult situation hanging on a cliff, it really helps to notice that this is what it is. And if you just notice that you are hanging from a tree, that is the beginning of the transformation. Most of the time we don't notice, awareness doesn't get in. We're too busy screaming and panicking. We're too busy being unhappy. Running through our minds, "What will we do?" or "What horrible thing will happen?" or "How can I make something good happen?" That's very different from being present and having attention. With attention we just notice and we let bare awareness alone when the world just rises up, and we notice, "Oh, that hurts." That's very different from panicking. Just the way of noticing, "Oh, anger" is very different from hitting someone. It's more powerful.

Hsiang-yen is trying to give our attention to suffering in the world. But also, too, there is that intense, gritty quality of life. Not just suffering in some vague sense, but what a strong taste it has.

Then he complicates matters. He says, "Someone appears beneath the tree and asks, 'What is the meaning of Bodhidharma's coming from the West?'" This is the fate of a teacher. This is what being a zen teacher is like. You're there dangling in your life and somebody comes along and says, "I have this problem, Roshi" and goes into great detail and you have to help them. He's putting out a truth of the bodhisattva. There is a lovely thing here. A great truth of the bodhisattva path that one of the things you can do, that you need to do often, is to make that effort for the good even if you're in a very difficult time. Often there's something you can do to make the world a little bit better. And if it's a very small thing it counts a lot at such times. It is like a crystal, the one bit of dirt that's dropped into this ocean that causes crystallization to occur. One good deed can be very powerful when you're in trouble. And you must respond, help save beings. How do you respond in this case?

When we take this up as a koan in our meditation, this is the dilemma. All the time we are living our way through but also helping others.

And he says, "If you don't answer you evade your responsibility; if you do answer you lose your life." which is not going to help either, is it? What will you do? A good question always is impossible. A good path always can't be walked. If you think of the four vows we have in zen, you will immediately understand this koanlike quality.

Beings are numberless, I vow to save them.

Buddha's way is beyond attainment, I vow to embody it. Something very beautiful is being pointed to here and that is that we can't do everything, but sometimes when you do the one thing, that is a great thing. What Hsiang-yen did was go on and just led this simple life--cleaning the temple grounds, fixing the plumbing. And all in that time while he was doing that, he didn't completely panic. He just kept his life together and then did what he could. Then something was growing in all that time. He was watering the seeds without knowing it. But when you are just faithful to your practice, when you do your zazen, even if you feel miserable. If you trust that and do your zazen and try to bring awareness into your life gradually, over the years, that seed grows into and you can't stop it from bursting into growth and flower. Practice just grows in us in spite of ourselves.

Wu-men's comment is typical of him. "Even if your eloquence flows like a river, it is all in vain." No matter how much we can explain things, we have to live it. And this can be quite hard. You have an experience where you really do understand zazen and zazen really opens for you and it's quite genuine. Then the next day you're in a mess again. And once again you are hanging from the tree. I think we need to accept this. If you can begin to accept this, then the whole thing becomes much more lovely. The world begins to silver over again and becomes much more workable. It is not yet gold, but something precious is happening.

And he says, "If you respond properly, you give life to those who have been dead and kill those who are alive." Everybody knows this is the truest goal of zen. And anything that we thought was lost will be returned to us.

And he says, "If you can't respond, you must wait and ask Maitreya about it." Maitreya is due to come in a few eons. Long after it would be of any help to us. So if you can't respond--in other words, you must respond now. You can't wait. In zazen you don't need to wait to do good zazen. Just do it now. Don't wait to do something good--an action for the good in your life. Do it now. Don't wait to notice your life. Do it now.

In his verse Wu-men says,

Hsiang-yen is just blabbing, he's talking nonsense;  
but his poisonous intentions are limitless.

He poisons all our delusions. All the things we hang onto, we will take away. Even if we hang onto something that is pious and we think is wonderful, we will still take that away.

When you go deeper and deeper into your zazen the world does become clearer and clearer. And that is true. You can really test that. If you are faithful to the way the road opens out and it does get wider. You will also find that as you go, you will still meet realms of darkness. You will still find times when you are hanging from the tree. This happens at the advanced levels as well as the beginning levels of practice. All we can say is that if you really set out to follow wisdom, it becomes quite demanding. It just asks that we grow and grow and grow and that we not just lie down and go to sleep with a little bit of knowledge. We have to go the whole route. As one of my great teachers said . . . . . But the truth is we don't have much choice, I think, really. We went and started. Once you've started it, it's really hard to go back. It's hard to go back to sleep once you've opened your eyes a little to the world. I think we just have to enjoy that and relish its strong garlic. You can complain about it or you can just get to like garlic. I think it's delicious myself.

It's that strong taste of life that is really with us. I think that we find our joy there up in the tree hanging. Soen Nakagawa Roshi had a period when he was quite interested in Christianity. This new religion . . . . . He was reading about how Jesus was hanging on the cross with the thieves. It's the story of the thieves who were crucified with Jesus. One of the thieves says something that pleases Jesus. And Jesus says, "You will be with me Paradise." Including no matter what you've done or what you're suffering, to have a pure heart at this moment you enter the kingdom of . . . . . He says, "You will be with me in Paradise. Soen Roshi was very disturbed about this . . . . . on the cross. He asked around a lot and somebody came up with a translation from one of the Orthodox Christian schools, I can't remember which one-- . . . . . Orthodox, I think. "You are with me in Paradise, right now, hanging on the cross." Yes, that's right.

So it is at that very moment when we are suffering the light is there, too, if we open our eyes and experience it. The light of the buddha is always there.

Thank you very much. Keep up your zazen.

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end of record