

CASE 37

Isan's "Karma Consciousness"

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Instruction:

Driving the plowman's ox and dragging his nose around;
Robbing the hungry man of his food and grabbing his throat fast.
Is there anyone who can wield [such] a poisonous hand?

Case:

Isan asked Kyôzan, "Suppose a man asks you, saying, 'All living beings are tossed in a vast karma-consciousness, and have no foundation to rely upon.' How would you check him?" Kyôzan said, "If such a monk appears, I call out to him, 'Mr. So-and-so!' When he turns his head, instantly I say, 'What is this?' If he hesitates, then I say to him, 'Not only is there a vast karma-consciousness, but also there is no foundation to rely upon.'" Isan said, "Good."

Verse:

One calls you and you turn your head around—do you know your self or not?
The full moon, shining vaguely through ivy, even becomes a crescent.
The child of great riches is ruined a bit;
Endlessly destitute, how sorrowful he is!

On the Instruction:

Yesterday evening we had a special gathering to commemorate the publishing of my book. I want to express my sincere thanks to all those who were instrumental in making this possible. I really feel ashamed at all the fuss being made on my behalf. When the book is feted in such a way, however, I feel I have to devote myself even more to my activities as teacher.

We now turn to the Instruction for today's case:

Driving the plowman's ox and dragging his nose around. In Japan the

traditional farmer would use an ox or a horse to plow the field, although in most cases it was an ox. He would tie a ring through the nose of the ox and use the animal to plow his fields. Thus, for the farmer, his ox is his most important possession. Without his help he couldn't do anything. But the verse says that the ox is pulled around here and there by his nose. The ox, the farmer's most important possession, has been stolen and is being pulled around by his nose. The next line is saying much the same thing.

Robbing the hungry man of his food and grabbing his throat fast. For the starving man, food is the most important thing. But here it says that his food has been stolen and his throat is held fast. How terrible! In both cases it's a matter of stealing away what is most precious to us. What could that most precious thing be? For most people the most important thing is their thoughts and concepts. It's the "special right" of human beings to think about all sorts of things from dawn to dusk. But it's precisely those thoughts that must be "stolen away." The reason for doing so is that we become aware of our true self. The hungry man has his food taken away from him and his throat held fast. This is the same thing. For many people the most important thing is money. Then comes a good name in society or special rights and duties. Another important matter would be education and learning, because without them we can't really make a living, most people would say. But now they are stolen away. What for? Once again, it's in order to realize your true self. Most people don't even realize that they are holding onto something for dear life. They believe their concepts and delusions are important and they treasure them so lovingly. But in most cases they don't even realize they are doing so. In the case of a sick person, however, you can tell by looking at him. "Sick" is meant here in terms of being "spiritually sick" and not physical illness. It's a sickness of the mind, in the sense that we don't really know who we are, we don't really know what we're doing here. Seen with the eyes of our true nature, we are all like this in the sense of being prisoners of our thoughts and delusions. We don't see what is actually there, but imagine things to be there which are really not there. That which is one, we see as two. This is the same thing. There are many kinds of "spiritual illness." People believe that others are persecuting them or bullying them. So it's a matter of bringing people back to their original true self, to their original unsullied self. Nevertheless, it's very hard to bring people to a realization of this. They stubbornly believe that their present ways are all right and cling tenaciously to them. To bring people to their senses in such a case, you sometimes have to force them to drink "bitter" medicine. Otherwise, the "illness" will become worse. And if you leave things as they are, they might end up dying. If you want those people to regain their health, you sometimes have to take drastic measures, just like a physician at times. As it says here in the Instruction, sometimes you have to take drastic action such as stealing away the farmer's ox and pulling it around by its nose, or stealing the hungry man's food and stopping up his throat. Why is it necessary to do such things? To save all beings. It's

certainly not done to bully and tease others. But nowadays there are many people who are not aware of this and don't understand this matter. But this is most difficult to do, because you have to be blunt and give people the straight talk. I'm receiving you all individually in dokusan. Actually, I should take this stern and blunt approach in dokusan, because that's the best way to raise up truly outstanding students. But then I feel sorry for you and end up giving you the answer. I have to reflect on how I'm often too soft on you. Unless you take a strict attitude, you're not going to rear up good children. Nowadays parents in Japan tend only to praise their children and avoid scolding them. In some cases it's absolutely necessary to tell children straight out that what they are doing is wrong. Otherwise they won't grow up to be outstanding persons. We go now to the next line in the Instruction:

Is there anyone who can wield [such] a poisonous hand? Is there anyone capable of taking such drastic measures? An example will now be given and we are asked to look carefully. The author is summoning up the Main Case.

On the Case:

Isan asked Kyōzan, "Suppose a man asks you, saying, 'All living beings are tossed in a vast karma-consciousness, and have no foundation to rely upon.' How would you check him?" Many of you are already familiar with Isan and Kyōzan, who have already appeared several times in the koans. Isan was the disciple of Hyakujō Ekai Zenji, and thus a brother in the dharma to such masters as Ōbaku Kiun Zenji. It was from Ōbaku that the Rinzai School of Zen emerged. And from Isan rose up the so-called Igyō School of Zen, which is known for its very gentle approach. Thus, when people are critical of this school they use the expression "court noble" (kuge) to express its spirit. The Rinzai School, on the other hand, is known as "Rinzai the general." For like a gallant figure on horseback, it has a commanding presence. Then there is the Soto School, which is known as "Soto the farmer" because of its slow and meticulous approach, like a farmer pulling out each weed one at a time. In contrast, as just mentioned, the Igyō School is known as the "court noble," to express its magnanimous, generous-hearted spirit, although the "way is truly lofty." Needless to say, mere magnanimity with no real content will not do. It's often said the Isan and his disciple Kyōzan were perfectly in tune with each other, more intimate than parent and child. In today's case, Isan the teacher checks on how his student Kyōzan guides people in practice. Records say that Isan was 23 years old when he became a disciple of Hyakujō Zenji. This was during the reign of the Emperor Kanmu in Japan (12th year of Enryaku). Hyakujō was 74 years old. After becoming Hyakujō's disciple, he acted as his attendant for 24 years. Case 40 (Isan Kicks Over the Jug) of the *Gateless Gate* relates how Isan became the abbot of the temple on Taizan, as many of you will recall. It was this Isan who posed the question to Kyōzan that appears in today's koan:

“Suppose a man asks you, saying, ‘All living beings are tossed in a vast karma-consciousness, and have no foundation to rely upon.’ How would you check him?” “All living beings” means all sentient beings, without a single exception. “Tossed in a vast karma consciousness” refers to how we are all pursued by delusive concepts and thoughts from morning to night. If you explain it in more logical terms, you could say the first delusion is that of a separate self. In other words, we recognize such a consciousness of self. We recognize an objective world in dualistic opposition to ourselves. We recognize “self and others.” This is actually the source of all delusion. The source is this sense of a separate self. The feelings and thoughts that arise from that basic delusion are known here as karma consciousness (*gosshiki*). That’s what it is explained in logical terms. And such thoughts and feelings arise endlessly just like a beard sprouting. From dawn to dusk we are plagued by such delusive thoughts. As a result, we have no real foundation in our lives. Where do all these thoughts and feelings actually arise from? The question is asking what the source of all those thoughts and feelings is. This is a difficult test question indeed! Recall the words in the *Diamond Sutra*:

Dwelling nowhere, the mind should come forth.

Although there is no source, the mind comes forth continuously in feelings such as happy, sad, etc. Where do all those thoughts and feelings come from the whole day long? When we get down to basics, there is the matter of our being born and dying. But where do we come from and where do we go? This is what Isan is actually asking with his checking question.

Kyōzan said, “If such a monk appears, I call out to him, ‘Mr. So-and-so!’ When he turns his head, instantly I say, ‘What is this?’ If he hesitates, then I say to him, ‘Not only is there a vast karma-consciousness, but also there is no foundation to rely upon.’” The question “What is this?” is the question that Bassui Zenji constantly posed to his attendant Minki, who was probably about 23 years old at the outset. He waited on Bassui Zenji the whole day long, and every time Bassui saw him, stern master that he was, he would call out, “What’s this?!” (Japanese: *kore nanzo*). Bassui Zenji’s famous koan was “what is the mind” (*shin kore nanimono*). He wanted his students to come to an actual experience of the nature of mind. This is the same for the koan Mu and other koans. When I tell you to practice Mu (*nentei*), it’s in order to have you grasp your own true self. Another question of Bassui’s was “who is it that hears?” We can hear various sounds, but who or what is hearing those sounds? You can hear the sound of the rain, but who is actually hearing it? You must grasp the one who is hearing. It is said that the attendant Minki fell over dead one day when going to dokusan, presumably bringing tea to his master. Once again, Bassui called out, “what is this?!” Minki was about to leave the dokusan room, when once again the voice came from behind, “What is this!?” “Minki!” he cried

out and toppled over. That cry of “Minki!” actually exhausts the universe. It is not recorded whether he actually came to enlightenment in that moment or not, but Bassui Zenji evidently felt sorry for him. On his own he carved a wooden figure of his attendant and placed it on display.

Kyôzan is asking the same thing: “What is this!” I have no way of knowing if there was a historical connection between the two men as far as this question is concerned, or whether Bassui Zenji was familiar with this koan. Even if he hadn’t been, he no doubt would have posed the question in the same way. At any rate, Kyôzan says that if a monk were to come by he would immediately call out, “What is this!?” If the monk can immediately respond with something, that would be fine, but what if the monk dithers for a moment? After all, it’s like being hit from behind with a *kyosaku*. Kyôzan says he would wait for him to hesitate and would then say, “Not only is there a vast karma-consciousness, but also there is no foundation to rely upon.”

He is saying in effect, “You are constantly thinking something from dawn to dusk.” But that is not all, in my opinion. He is saying it is empty when he says there is nothing to rely on. It’s the same as form is emptiness, emptiness is form. Everything arises from nothing. All that karma consciousness is completely empty. At any rate, Kyôzan answers Isan like this and Isan says, “Good.” But some commentators say that it is precisely this “Good” that is not so good. Remember how the Igyô School is referred to as the “court noble,” very magnanimous and quick to agree. Maybe it would have been better if he had taken another step and said, “What a shame” (*kasshako*) or “there’s no connection” (*mokkyôshô*). If you are too quick to approve or speak too much to help the student, your lineage will not last that long. The Igyô School is no longer in existence. We only encounter its spirit in these few koans that have been handed down to us, but the Igyô School does not exist as a school of Zen today, like the Rinzai or Soto schools. There are some commentators who feel this is the result of Isan’s speaking too glibly and readily. When you get right down to it, you have to remain strict.

On the Verse:

One calls you and you turn your head around—do you know your self or not? When someone calls you (hey Nakamura-kun!¹) you know that the one turning his head is you. But do you really know who you are?

The full moon, shining vaguely through ivy, even becomes a crescent. Although we are perfect from the very beginning (all beings are intrinsically Buddha), because we are bothered by various concepts and thoughts, we cannot see that fact clearly. We only see it very vaguely. There is another way of seeing

¹ Ooi Nakamura-kun! (Hey Nakamura!) was the title of a hit Japanese pop song sung by Ichiro Wakahara in 1958.

this line from the verse. Although the moon appears sometimes as a crescent and sometimes as a ball, it's the same single moon. It's like our concepts and thoughts, which prevent us from realizing that the moon is round from the very beginning, so that we see it as a crescent, because we have not yet grasped our true nature. Although we are children of Buddha or children of God from the outset, we fail to realize it, and think we are just wretched salaried workers. But lo and behold, each and every one of us is a Buddha! If a Buddha were to appear on the scene and see all of you sitting here in zazen, he would say that there is not a single unenlightened, ordinary person (bonpu). And that's the truth from the standpoint of the essential world. Thus, just the thought that there are any unenlightened persons is already a violation of the true Dharma of the Tathagatha; it goes against the true teachings of Buddhism. To think in that way is an error. That's certainly true. From the perspective of the essential world, we are all Buddhas. Hakuin Zenji says "all sentient beings are intrinsically Buddha" (shujō honrai hotoke nari). Buddhism speaks in terms of ten worlds, of which six are worlds of delusion: hell, hungry ghosts, beasts, angry beings (shura), human beings and heavenly beings. The other worlds are the worlds of enlightenment. The lowest world is hell. What is hell, when we get down to it? It's believing that all other people are your enemy, the belief that the others are persecuting you. That means the sense of a dualistic standoff is at its strongest. This feeling of a dualistic opposition is actually a dream and does not really exist. But although it doesn't exist, we can't help feeling it does. Nevertheless, there are various degrees in the strength of that delusion, with hell as the place where the delusion is strongest. You feel that everyone is your enemy and you have no allies. There are many people who are experiencing suffering in this world. It's also said that all the other five delusive worlds are found in this world of human beings. You could say that the world of humans is the world where light and darkness are divided in half. Darkness means a pessimistic condition; it doesn't mean physical darkness. But if you become aware of the light, the darkness disappears in a flash. If you become aware of your own light, your sufferings disappear. Even though the darkness may have existed for millions of years, if you light a single candle it suddenly becomes bright. This darkness is not something that actually exists. Most of us live in a world that's half dark and half light. But then there is the world of people who live almost completely in darkness, suffering greatly as a result. That must be truly painful.

The child of great riches is ruined a bit. This is a reference to the parable of the rich man's poor son, which appears in the *Lotus Sutra*. Although the son is a millionaire lacking nothing, he lives the life of a penniless beggar. This is how we are. "Ruined a bit" is said in the sense of making a small error. What is the error? Mistakenly believing there is a separate self, out of which arises the idea of dualistic opposition between self and others. And when such feelings get stronger there is no

way out. That's our situation. We're all intrinsically millionaires (in a spiritual sense) but mistakenly believe we haven't a penny to our name. But one look at your wallet will prove that false (which is said in way of a joke!).

Endlessly destitute, how sorrowful he is! The word translated here as "endlessly" is the same meaning as in vast karma consciousness, in the sense of it continuing on without end. We have lost our way and don't know where to go or how far we have to go. We are ill at ease as if threatened by something, feeling that we are somehow injured. Ill at ease and agitated...that's our condition. You would have to call it "darkness," a condition lacking light. But if you light a single lamp, the darkness disappears. How do we light the lamp? When you get down to it, the only way is to clearly see your true self. It's a matter of seeing your own true nature. If you can do that, you can attain true peace of mind.

All living beings are tossed in a vast karma-consciousness, and have no foundation to rely upon. These are fine words indeed. It's because it's empty that we are saved. There is no need to worry about something collapsing. Emptiness is our true home. This is a little different from saying that loneliness is our home. I recall some lines from a novel by Natsume Soseki. A professor suffering from a nervous breakdown says something to the effect that "loneliness is my dwelling." I myself do not think that way. I would say that emptiness is our true dwelling. Please become empty!