

Teisho by Albert Low
Case number 55 of the Hekiganroku

Alive or dead?

Introduction

Quiet and secret, entirely One-- unimpeded action, immediate perception, everything manifests awakening. Like a dash of sparks, a flash of lightning, cutting through all confusion. Sitting on the tigers head, seizing its tail he is like cliff a thousand feet high. Can one help people by teaching a single way or not? To test, I cite this. Look!

Case

Dogo and Zen-gen went to a house to show sympathy. Zen-gen hit the coffin and asked, "Alive or dead?" Dogen replied, "I won't say alive, I won't say dead." Zen-gen demanded, "Why won't you say?" Dogo repeated, "I won't say." On their way home, Zen-gen cried, "Tell me right now teacher, alive or dead; if you don't tell me, I will hit you." Dogo said, "You may hit me, but I won't say." Zen-gen hit him.

Later after Dogo died, Zen-gen went to Seki-so and told him the foregoing story. Seki-so said, "I won't say alive, and I won't say dead." Zen-gen said, "Why won't you say?" Seki-so repeated, "I won't say, I won't say." At these words Zen-gen came to awakening.

One day, Zen-gen took a hoe into the Buddha hall and crossed back and forth, from east to west and west to east. Seki-so asked, "What are you doing?" Zen-gen said, "I am looking for my teacher's relics." Seki-so said, "Vast waves spread far and wide, foaming billows flood the skies - what relics of our late master are you looking for? »

Zen-gen said, "It is a way of repaying the kindness of my old teacher." Fu of T'ai Yuan said, "The late masters relics are still present. «

Verse

Hares and horses have horns
Cows and goats have none.
It is quite infinitesimal,
It piles up mountain high.
The golden relic still exists,
It still exists now.
Foaming billows sweep the sky.

Where can you put it? No, nowhere!
The single sandal returned to India
And is lost forever.

This is a tragic Koan. However, before commenting on it, perhaps I could dwell for a while on the introduction. The introductions, provided by Zen master Engo, often sets the background to a Koan. In a similar way, we live our life against a "background." Sadly, most people ignore this background. All they see therefore, are disjointed, fragmented elements with no cohesion, coordination or intrinsic meaning. This makes them believe that they have to find, or even give, life a meaning. They believe that life must have a point and that this point must be found in what they are doing, or in a relation with some special person, or in being "successful," or whatever.

Although I use the word "background" this is only a metaphor. Another way of saying the same thing is to say that we are always living in samadhi; samadhi is our natural state. But samadhi does not exist like the sky or space. Unfortunately, when I talk about a background, one immediately, whether one likes it or not, conjures up something, an essence or substratum. However what I mean by this background is the very absence of an essence, the very absence of any reality outside. Everything, including time and space, something and nothing, life and death, is eternally coming into being, and I do not mean everything is becoming. Samadhi, or what one might like to call Buddha-nature or Bodhi-nature, the original, primordial Light or the One, is the source of this fountain of being.

Quiet and secret, entirely One.

I am not part of the Whole; I am the Whole, the One. Most people find this so difficult. They believe things surround them and so think that they also are things among things. Then they generalize and believe further that all these things collectively make up a whole of which they are now a part. Such beliefs involve a separation, a dualism. They imply "me" and "it," "me and the world," "me and the Whole," "me and Cosmic consciousness" and so on. We must let go of this opposition, this separation if we want to see into this koan. This is why Engo starts right off saying, "quiet and secret, entirely One." This is it!

Notice, Engo says "Quiet and secret." Quiet... The One is the Silence of Silence. It is the Stillness of Stillness. It is secret, hidden ... we look for it in vain. When one looks at a flower, all one sees, is the flower. When one looks at another person, all one sees is that other person. One sees a stone and all that one sees is a stone. Things among things. One forgets oneself. And yet, and yet! Quiet and secret is the One.

Unimpeded action, immediate perception, everything manifests awakening!

This is how it is! Vital, alive, brilliant. Our technological society, and the science that has made it possible, offers us a dead world. Space travel is the vogue and out-of-space is

a chilling, dead, vacancy, a gaping void, like some horrible monster's mouth. Then matter, separated from life, has been broken down into units or waves. All is just dead movement. Animals are mindless machines. Even human beings are seen as complicated robots, programmed, hard-wired, switched on and off.

We laugh at "primitive people." We say they animated nature, and smile at them, because they saw spirits in trees and in the rocks. They saw fairies in the glen. They are so ridiculous, utterly ridiculous ... We, on the other hand, have an objective viewpoint. We see things objectively! Naturally, when we see things objectively, everything becomes an object: you, me, our lives, our hopes and fears" just. objects, or movement of objects! Preferably square ones, so that we can measure them exactly. However, is it possible that the primitives did not animate the world, but that perhaps, we have killed it? Perhaps the whole world, including rocks and stones, was once alive, once, really alive. When one sees it from the standpoint that each of us is the Whole, each of us is in samadhi, each of us is samadhi then all is alive. Samadhi is an ever-uprising, ever-flowing, ever-springing stream of being, of knowing. Then the whole world again comes alive, alive with unimpeded action, immediate perception, then everything will manifest awakening!

Unimpeded action, immediate perception, everything manifests awakening. Like a dash of sparks or a flash of lightning, cutting through all complications.

When we practice Zen, we want to raise the dead. We want to bring back to life our own lives. When you ask the question "Who am I?" You must see yourself as living. You are alive! If you see yourself simply in terms of thoughts and ideas, if you know life itself only as a concept, you will not be able to realize this most obvious truth! Concepts kill, concepts freeze. You are not a concept. You are immediate, living quality. One awakens to just this. Once you become alive, the world becomes alive, everything is alive. In the Rock Opera, Jesus-Christ Super Star, Jesus sings, "If you shut me up, the rocks and stones will start to sing. In Zen, it says, "The rocks and stones preach the Dharma. The rocks and stones will start to sing! Wake up, wake up! Let the rocks and stones start to sing!

Engo then says, "Sitting on the tigers head, seizing its tail." This is a very dangerous thing to do and not something I would recommend. What Engo means is that you practice in the midst of dangers, in the midst of it all. If you want the tiger's cub you must go into the tiger's cave. A painting by Shi K'o of a Zen master leaning on the back of a tiger, fast asleep is the picture of the fully awakened man.

Sitting on the tigers head, seizing its tail he is like a thousand foot high cliff. Who is the "He" to whom Engo refers?

He then asks, "Is there a way to help people by teaching a single way?" What is a single way? It is the way by which we see "singly." In the Gospels according to St. Thomas it is said, "If thine eye be single, thy whole body is filled with light."

Zen-gen

Before we go to the case, perhaps we could comment on a two mondos that involve Zen-gen. He is the monk who struck the master. Later, he became in his own right, quite a famous master.

A monk once asked him, " I am very close to you, separated only by the window ; why is it, I do not see your face? »

The face is often used in Zen to refer to Buddha nature. Can you see why? A breakthrough koan asks, "What was your face before your parents were born?" Another master said, "The mountains, fields, and trees, these are my face." What then is this window that separates Zen-gen from the master's face? I often use the window as a metaphor for a koan. Alas! if you cannot see through a koan it is not a window but a thousand mile high cliff. Zen-gen says, I see it but I don't see it. Why don't I see your face? All that separates is a window, not a wall, but a window! Normally a window doesn't separate anything. Normally a window is there, in order to avoid separation, it is there in order so that you can see through it. And yet this monk is saying, " I am separated only by a window, why I can't see your face?

Then master Dogo declared, "The universe is never veiled!" This reply is like the subtitle of the book that I wrote on the Mumonkan, The World a Gateway.

In the other mondo, that took place after Zen-gen had become a Zen master, a monk told him, "I have come to train myself in order to solve the question of life and death." This is worthy objective. It is said that if one cannot face death one cannot face life. However, Zen-gen answered, "At my place, there is not such thing as life and death." Another master said, "If Buddha is in life and death, there is no life or death. »

Seki-So

Another mondo involves Seki-So, who comes in towards the end of the koan. He was also a very famous Zen master after having been a disciple of Tozan. One day, Tozan said to his monks, After the summer sesshin you disperse, some going east, some going west but you should go through the thousands of miles of country where there is no blade of grass.

In the Zen tradition the year was divided into four parts each of three months: the spring months were devoted to practice, the summer months were devoted to pilgrimages, the autumn months were again devoted to practice, and the winter three months were again given over to pilgrimages. Rochester Zen Center was organized in that way. The teacher was there for two terms of three months and, during the other months, he was away.

Anyway Tozan says that you should go through the thousands of miles of country where there is no blade of grass. What sort of country is that? The Prajnaparamita says, "no eyes, ears, nose, tongue, body, mind." To understand what the sutra means you must journey through the country where there is no blade of grass.

Then Seki-So said, "When I go out of the gate I find grass there." Did he miss the point? or did he take what Tozan was saying one step further? Why does he say, " When I go out of the gate I see grass." Bodhidharma talks of vast emptiness and not a thing that can be called holy. Joshu speaks of the oak-tree in the garden. Which of the two is right?

Return to the Koan

So, let us return to the Koan. Dogo was the teacher and Zen-gen his disciple. It is quite likely that Zen-gen, insofar as he was accompanying the teacher on this occasion, would be a close disciple to Dogo. Zen-gen and Dogo went to the house of a lay student who had died, to make a condolence call and to express their regret and sympathy. While they were there, Zen-gen struck the coffin and asked, "Alive or dead?"

In a way, I suppose, we could say that Zen-gen is asking, "What is life, and, above all, what is death?" This question about death, what is death, what will happen to me after I die, can bring one to the brink of desperation. One can become completely suffocated by it. I suffered just this kind of torment for about two years in the early part of my training. Everywhere I went, this specter of death accompanied me. I would sit, it would sit. I would get up and walk, it would get up and walk. Having breakfast, going to bed, at work, wherever I went, there were this horror of death, this terrible feeling coming from the realization that everything was coming to an end, everything was impermanent.

The question, "What is the point of life which ends in that way, in nothing!" was a constant torture. I was haunted by the recognition that in 50, 100 years, everybody around me, would be dead. Strangers would populate the whole world. Everything one has done, that seems to so meaningful, would be completely forgotten! Two hundred years, not even the dust will remain! I was filled with a sense of hopelessness, I felt that any kind of activity, in these circumstances, was useless.

Buddha also must have been haunted by a similar horror. It is said that he met a sick person an old person and a dead person, and that these encounters completely overwhelmed him so much so that he had to leave home and search for a way out of the horror of impermanence. However these encounters are simply a graphic way of saying that he encountered sickness, old age and death.

I wondered at the time, and sometimes still wonder, how people without any spiritual sustenance do not also walk around in horror! What enables people to be so stupefied that they don't wake up to the terror of the situation?

The fear of death

A monk went to his teacher and said, "I am not afraid of death!" The teacher answered, "Oh, what a pity!" The fear of death is one of the greatest friends that we can have on the spiritual path. It forces us to look, to ask seriously, "What is it about? What does it mean? What am I doing? What am I?" Anytime the fear of death strikes you, do not waste the opportunity that is offered. Treasure the moment, use it! Sit on the tiger's head, grasp the tiger's tail ... Because this is the way, truly, to open yourself up to what is worthwhile.

A Zen master, Suzuki Shosan, who lived during the 1600's, had been a samurai earlier in his life. As you know samurais were trained to face death at any moment. In Shosan's time a samurai was completely at the service of his Lord. If the Lord told him to commit suicide, he would have had no alternative but to do so. In other words, the samurai was living constantly on the edge. Suzuki Shosan practiced Zen and, in his own way, became a famous Zen teacher. He did away with all the koans and just had his students meditate on death. As he said, "Make the one character 'death' the master in your heart, observing it and letting go of everything else. »

Gurdjieff used to say that we are asleep and far from any contact with what is real. He said that the only hope left for humanity was that some kind of organ should be implanted in us, to remind us constantly of our own death and the death of all those around us. Remember, all those whom you hate, despise, all whom you look upon as being problems in your life, as being enemies, as well as all those you love, those who are your friends, they too will all die.

This is similar to something else that this samurai Zen master, Suzuki Shosan, said, "How idiotic, nobody from a hundred years ago is around today. All traces of them have vanished. But forgetting this, we desire trivial things and become planners and schemers. How stupid! »

Many people find walking around a cemetery and reading the inscriptions on tomb's stones very tranquilizing. I shall never forget some inscriptions on a set of six tombstones in a Montreal cemetery. Five of them were in memory of people who had all died in the same year. One of them lived on and died 40 years later. The one who lived, was a woman. Of the five who died in that same terrible year, one was a man and four were evidently children. One could not help feel the tragedy soaked in those stones. And yet, a peace pervaded them nevertheless.

Suzuki Shosan said, "Guard this feeling of death with all your might! That is all I ever say. As long as Shosan is alive, he will talk of nothing but death. »

Guard this feeling of death! Guard this fear of death! This is what we have just said, "Guard it, because it is your friend!" Unfortunately, the fear of death takes us by the throat most often at 2.30 in the morning when our resources and defenses are at their lowest. All that we want to do then is to throw up the battlements, surround ourselves with stone walls, get out the guns and shoot down the enemy. Anything! This is when you put steel in the concrete bunker that you call "myself," to reinforce it. This is when you slam down the portcullis, tear up the drawbridge. This is when the ego, the sense of self, the feeling of "I am something," is imbedded ever more deeply, deeply into your being. But it is precisely at this time that you can open yourself, because, paradoxically, it is now that the bunker is at its weakest. The enemy is already on its way in. The enemy which is yourself.

Buddha gave an account of his own struggle with the enemy, an account that is very inspiring. He said, "Suppose I spend nights in shrines of forest, park, or tree, fearsome and hair-raising though they may be, making such shrines my lodging for the night, that I might behold for myself the panic and fear and horror of it all ... a deer maybe came upon me, or a peacock threw down a twig, or else a breeze stirred up a heap of fallen leaves. Then I thought here comes that fear and panic and horror

He actually went into these shrines and the forests to allow fears, panic and horror to overtake him.

Then I had this thought, "Why do I remain thus in constant fear and apprehension? Let me bend down to my will that panic fear and horror, just as I am, and just as it has come to be. So, as I was walking to and fro, that panic fear and horror came upon me. Then I neither stood still nor sat nor lay down, but just walking up and down I bent that panic and fear and horror to my will. »

Buddha says that by going out to meet fear, one will eventually find a way through it.

It is obvious that this question of death and its meaning must have been a terrible torment to Zen-gen. I say it is obvious, because later, on his way home, he attacks Dogo and cries out, "You must tell me otherwise I will hit you." He then goes on to strike the master, which was, of course, a very serious thing to do. But it shows the degree of desperation that Zen-gen must have felt.

The three kinds of death

What is the fear of death, anyway? It is as well to get to know the size of your adversary. There are three kinds of death.

Anonymous death

There is the anonymous death. This is the death that you see on TV or read about it in the newspaper. Ten thousand people in China were killed in a flood, or forty thousands Turkish people were killed in an earthquake, or 250 people died in an airplane crash.

Numbers, deaths. In this age of "faction" or infotainment (Marielle, I would not try to translate these last two words), on TV we are never quite sure anymore whether death is real or simulated. One is never sure whether the news shots are real or whether they have simply been taken out of old films and are being used for some reason or other. What is number anyway? Ten thousand, hundred thousand? Forty million people were killed in the last world war. Some people think fifty millions! But, ten million more or less, what is the difference? This is what I mean by anonymous death. Many people expect to die this is the kind of death. It is so prevalent that they expect to die an anonymous death.

Death of a loved one

Then there is another death. The death of someone you love so much. Her, death rips away half a world. You see her die. You hear her agony. You feel her fear. You want to do something to release her pain but it is all out of your reach. It is like someone slipping away, drowning. You can't quite reach her fingers as she slides away. One is left in that stunned, dead kind of feeling, numbed and asking what it all means? But her death tells you nothing about your death. It tells you a lot about loss, about grief, about pain. But, it tells you nothing about your death. One can learn nothing about death by seeing another die. All that it tells you is that you are in the face of an utter mystery.

One's own death

The only way that we can know anything, anything at all about death, is by dying. This means that, because we are not dying physically, when we are afraid of death, we are not afraid of physical death. We are afraid of the idea of death. Socrates in the Apology said that perhaps death is the best thing that could ever happen to me. Why do I know that death is something bad? When we are present at the death of another we see all those people crying. We are stunned; we don't know what is going on. So we think the worst.

Shakespeare wondered about the dreams that we may encounter when we have shuffle off this mortal coil. "Ah, there's the rub," he says, "Who knows what kind of dreams may come?" However, most people are not afraid of the dreams. Most people say, "I don't mind the dreams - I don't want the nothing." It is the idea of nothing, which paralyzes. It is this idea of "nothing" that we must take a close look at. If you work with the fear of death, look at this idea of nothing. Is this what you are afraid of, and is this the same as death? Are you afraid of the idea of annihilation? If you look a little closer you may see that it is not just an idea of annihilation that you fear, it is also the idea of being swallowed" The fear of death is the feeling of being swallowed.

What can swallow you, if not you yourself? This is the source of our fear! We are constantly fighting against ourselves. All our struggles to maintain, to hold on, to resist, to live at all costs, comes from the fear of this giant behind us, this enemy, this dark sinister force which bears down on us, threatening to engulf us. We live in terror until we turn around and find that this dark sinister force is simply our true nature. A poem called

the Hound of Heaven, written by a catholic priest, Gerard Manley Hopkins, is about a man running away, pursued by a hound, by a ferocious dog. The poem is about the terror that he feels as he runs from "the hound of heaven," as he calls it. Eventually he can run no more and he stumbles and falls. As he lies there, he turns to find that it is not a fierce hound that awaits him, but God.

Angelus Silesius said, "If you die before you die, you do not die when you die." If you turn and face the hound of heaven, if you look down its jaws and see that it is God, how can you ever die after that?

But, as we said, it is in the chilling hours of the morning, when you can hear your own heart beating, pounding, when your hair stands on end, that one needs the courage to look down the jaws of the hound of heaven.

Carl Gustav Jung, the psychologist said

"When one is alone, and it is night and so dark and quiet that one does not hear or see anything but the thoughts that add and subtract the years of one's life, and the long sequence of those unpleasant facts, which prove cruelly how far the hand of the clock has advanced and that slow and uncheckable approach of that dark wall, which threatens to swallow up irretrievably all I love, possess, hope and strive for, the all the wise dicta go into hiding and fear descends upon the sleepless like a choking blanket.

An English poet said,

"We are the fools of time and terror
Days steal on us, and steal from us ; yet we live,
Loathing our life, and yet dreading still to die

The koan once more

Against the background of all of that, one must understand Zen-gen's anguish when he said to his master, "Tell me or I will strike you!" Why does Dogo say, "I won't say alive, I won't say dead!" What does he mean? I won't say alive, I won't say dead! Zen-gen strikes a coffin so how can Dogen say alive? How can he even think alive about this corpse in the coffin? If he simply had said, "I won't say he is dead!" he would have simply been making a philosophical statement. But he said, "I won't say alive, I won't say dead!" This is no longer a philosophical statement, but a koan.

Tell me, right now, are you alive or dead? Now you say, I am alive, but what do you mean by that? Do you know really what it means to be alive? Do you know it, or do you think it? Is being alive an idea that you are holding carefully, protecting very carefully in the same way that you are holding, protecting very carefully the idea I am a person? If so, are you saying that that idea is alive? Ideas don't live. Life lives ideas.

What gives life? It is not life itself. It is like daylight. Daylight does not simply come from the sun. Daylight comes because the light of the sun strikes the atmosphere. Life comes from the light of life striking an organism. Just as light and the atmosphere are indistinguishable and so give daylight, so the light of life and the organism are indistinguishable and so give life. What is this life giving force? If it is life giving, why should it not be also death giving? We think that this Quiet and secret and entirely One must only give life. But why should it give only life? The quiet and secret, entirely one is it alive or is it dead?

After Zen-gen had struck the master, he had to leave the monastery for fear of reprisals from the other monks. Later, after Dogen passed on, Zen-gen went to see another master Seki-so and told him what had happened. Seki-so also said, "I won't say alive, I won't say dead!" Zen-gen asked, "Why won't you say?" Seki-so repeated, "I won't say alive, I won't say dead!" Zen-gen came to awakening. When Dogen said, "I won't say, I won't say!" Zen-gen was thrown into such anguish that he struck out. When Seki-so said, "I won't say alive, I won't say dead," he came to awakening. What was the difference? What did he see the second time that he didn't see the first?

The first time he saw, I won't say, I won't say, as a denial, negative. It was a barrier. Zen-gen perceived Dogo as refusing. The second time, he sees, I won't say alive, I won't say dead, not in a negative way but in a positive way. It is said " If there is Buddha in life and death, there is no life and death. Or let put it this way: beyond life and death, what are you? Beyond being and not-being, what are you? Don't say nothing.

One day Zen-gen took a hoe into the Buddha hall and crossed back and forth, from east to west and west to east. Seki-so asked, "What are you doing?" Zen-gen answered, " I am looking for my teacher's relics.

It was said that a very holy man, when he died, would leave a deposit from his neck, like a necklace. It was called Buddha's necklace. These hard deposits, calcium I suppose, do not burn during cremation. They are very highly prized as relics coming from a holy man and are sometimes put into stupas which become sites for pilgrimages. But what was Zen-gen up to? He is walking back and forward in the Buddha Hall with a hoe. The Buddha hall is like a Zendo. It is a place where a number of Buddha figures can be found, and it is used very often as a place for meeting and for talks and so on. But you certainly do not go in there with a hoe. You are not going to dig anything at all in a Buddha Hall! What is Zen-gen doing? What does he mean when he says that he is looking for the relics of the master? In any case, where are the relics of the master right now?

Seki-so said, Vast waves spread far and wide, foaming billows flood the skies - what relics of our late master are you looking for?

In other words, the whole world is full to the brim. How can you hope to find these relics that you are looking for? Everything is form. Where are you going to find emptiness?

Everything is One. Where are you going to find anything else? Then Zeng-gen said, "It is a way of repaying the kindness of my old teacher. »

Somebody asked Hakuin, "what happens after we die?" Hakuin answered, " I don't know." The man said, "Well, what do you mean, I don't know. Are you not a Zen master?" Hakuin said, "Yes but not a dead one." This question has haunted human beings at all times. The story of Gilgamesh is very, very old story which some people say to be six thousand years old. It was handed down in an oral tradition a long time before it was written down. Gilgamesh went on pilgrimage after his great friend had died. He wanted to find the meaning of life in the face of death. In other words, the struggle with the meaning of life and of death is one the oldest of the struggles that human beings have engaged in and they have come up with many different ways of dealing with this question.

Each one of us, in our own way, has to come to terms with it.. We may come to terms with it by ignoring it and letting it lie on the wayside. However, the trouble is that if the question dies on the wayside, so does the question of life. It is the way that we work with the fact of death that will determine the quality and way that we live. None of us can predict how we are going to die, whether we are going to die peacefully or whether we are going to die stricken with fear. To boast in any way that one is going to die a death of equanimity is utmost foolishness. All kinds of hazards or problems can strike us at the moment of death. However, we can struggle to face the fear of death, because the fear of death is not the fear of physical death. The fear of death that we can struggle with, is the fear of death of the personality. This is what we are afraid of, the death of the feeling that I am in control, the death of the sense of self.

Christ said "Except a seed falls into the ground and die, it remains alone. But, if it dies, it brings forth much fruit."