

Every day mind is the Way

(an article by Albert Low)

“If you had not found me you would not be seeking me”
St. Augustine

Joshu, a Zen monk at the time, asked Zen master Nansen “What is the Way?” Nansen replied, “Every day mind is the Way!”

Nansen was a celebrated master of the T'ang dynasty, the period of Chinese history between seven hundred and nine hundred CE; it was a time when Zen flourished in China. Joshu was his student for about 50 years and he asked this question when he first met Nansen. After Nansen died, Joshu went on pilgrimage for twenty years until the age of eighty. He finally started teaching and became as famous as his teacher. He died at age 120.

Joshu's question was really, “What is Tao?” but it is usually translated as “What is the Way?” Tao is one of those words that has many meanings, as does the word “Way.” For example, you could ask the way to Paris or Berlin or Rome. If you were in Montreal and asked the way to Toronto you would probably be told to take route 40, which becomes highway 401 and it will take you to Toronto. ‘What is the way,’ in this case means in what direction must I go? But when you get the answer, take the route 40, you might then ask, “What is the best way to go there, by bus or by car? “ What is the way to travel the way? But Way means something more yet -- it could also mean the destination. Early Christians were ‘Followers of the Way’ and the same term is used of Buddhists. In other words the meaning of the ‘Way’ is complex.

All these meanings were involved in Joshu's question. He asked this question while he was still a very young man and had just started on the way. He was undoubtedly confused, perhaps dumbfounded, by Nansen's reply. Many people have come to me over the years to ask to practice Zen at the Center. I always ask them, “Why do you want to do this, why do you want to follow this way?” Most often they will say, in one way or another, that their life is confused, that they are unhappy. They will often ask questions like, “What is the meaning of my life, why must we suffer, what is death, what is really worthwhile?” It is because many people feel that something is missing in their lives, indeed because they feel that everyday mind is not the way, that they come to Zen. So why does Nansen say everyday mind is the Way.

Every day mind is getting out of bed, eating breakfast, going to work, coming home, going to bed. It is laughing and crying, being anxious and joyful. Everyday mind is

walking and talking, sitting down and standing up. It is the mind of suffering, conflict, anger and hatred, love and devotion. How can everyday mind be the way?

This was undoubtedly what Joshu felt as well. Tradition says that he walked miles to meet Nansen, and walking across 7th century China would have been more than a walk in the park. To walk all this way and then to be told that the answer was everyday mind must have been very confusing.

In the West, as in many parts of the East, the Way is closely associated with the miraculous. In the West we have been fed a steady diet of the wonders of the East, of the Tibetan Masters like Milarepa, who can fly, the masters who have uncanny occult powers, the superhuman control that some have over their own bodies, their capacity to heal, their unbounded love, and we feel that the extraordinary and the spiritual are, in some way the same.

Christ, we are told, had the power to heal, to walk on water, to change water into wine. He could resurrect the dead and even die himself for three days and then get up and walk about. These miracles are the centerpiece of the religion. To become a Christian saint one must have performed at least one miracle and preferably several more if possible. Everyday mind, we say, is too mundane, too ordinary, and so we want the opposite, we want the magical.

A story is told of a Zen master who, while on pilgrimage in China, met another pilgrim on the way. After a while they came to a wide river. The master stopped, but the other pilgrim carried on walking on the water to cross to the other side. When he was part way he turned to the master to beckon him across. The master called out, "You deceiver, I thought you were a man of value! If I had known that you would pull a stunt like that I would have cut you off at the ankles." In China too then the magical and the spiritual were often seen be connected, particularly in Taoism. Dogen, the great Japanese Zen master, on the other hand, felt that occult powers came to a person because of bad Karma. Far from encouraging visions, which are so cherished in many religions, (one only has to see the hysteria that surrounds the supposed sightings of the Virgin Mary,) in Zen it is said, "If you meet the Buddha, kill the Buddha."

Far from seeing the exotic, the marvelous, as the Way, Zen says that even something as mundane as washing the dishes is the Way: the direction to go in practice, the way to practice, and even the goal of practice itself. A monk came to Joshu's temple and asked, "I am new here, could you please tell me what the essence of your teaching might be?" "Have you eaten?" asked Joshu. "Yes." replied the monk. "Then go and wash your dishes."

Why is this? Why does Zen repudiate the magical and extol the mundane, everyday life? A clue to the answer to this question lies in another saying, this time by a famous Zen layman, P'ang, who lived more or less at the same time as Joshu. He said, "My miraculous power and magical ability: drawing water and chopping wood." In other words the mundane world is already miraculous and magical. The wonder is not that

people walk on water, it is that we walk at all. Speaking in tongues is not marvelous; saying “Good morning!” and “Good afternoon!” is wherein the miracle lies.

In the original conversation with Nansen, Joshu was, as I said, quite put out. In his confusion he stammered another question, “How do we get on the Way?” He is asking the most basic question, “How does one practice Zen?” Normally one is told that one must sit, preferably in one or other of the lotus postures, with the back straight and a low center of gravity and simply follow the breath. I usually emphasize the point that one must follow the breath and not control it. It is the simplest of all practices. One simply follows the breath; one simply allows the breath to breathe. In this there is no “I” who breathes. However, although it is so simple, it is almost impossible to do, except after many years hard work.

When Joshu asked, “How does one get on to the Way?” He was asking, “What must I do?” However, if everyday mind is the way, if simply blowing your nose is the wonderful, miraculous power and magical activity, what can there be to do? This is why Nansen replied, “If you try to get on to the way you push it away.” Anything that you do is already too much, even if it is just following the breath.

A story, which is one of my favorites, is the following: A monk went to Rinzai another very famous Zen Master, made his bows, was about to speak when Rinzai struck him. The monk recoiled in surprise and said, “Hey! Why are you hitting me? I haven’t even opened my mouth yet!” “What is the good of waiting until you have opened your mouth?” growled Rinzai. Nothing needs to be done; even to think of opening your mouth is already too much.

“From the beginning all beings are Buddha.” This is the first line of a very famous chant that we chant at the Montreal Zen Center. From the very beginning we are already home; all that we can ever seek is already accomplished. Before a step is taken the journey is complete. It is our very search, our lust for the miraculous and magical, that hides from us the truth that simply to be, simply to know “I am,” is already the miracle that we seek. A miracle cannot be understood with our normal reason and logic. It is beyond the laws of the universe; it cannot be defined, captured or contained. This is true of our real nature, of what we are originally; it is also true of anything that we do, even to blow the nose. This is what the sentence, “From the beginning all beings are Buddha,” truly means. We are all, as Jesus said, “the Light of the World,” we are the light from which the sun, stars and moon get their light. We are the light that throws no shadow, a light that cannot be seen, but is the light by which we see, hear, feel, taste and touch. But, alas! although we are the light, we search for ourselves in the shadows of experience.

Joshu persisted nevertheless in his questioning: “If that is so how do we know we are on the Way?” It would seem that at least we should know that we are on the Way. But Nansen says, “Knowing is an illusion; not knowing is a blank. It is like vast space, where is there room for good and evil?” All that we can know, no matter how sublime, all that we experience in ecstasy or sorrow, is not the real, it is not the truth. Again, to quote

Jesus, he said, "I am the Truth, the Life and the Way" This is true of each of us; each of us is the truth, I am the only reality. By this I do not mean that I, Albert Low, the personality or ego, is the only reality, or the Truth. The personality too can be known. What is it that knows but cannot be known? In this lies Nansen's final phrase, "It is like great space, where is there room for the opposites." This is the subject of Zen practice.

Let me tell another story. Ten people had to cross a river that was swollen because of a storm. When they were across one of the group counted the group to ensure that they were all across. He counted 1-2-3-4-5-6-7-8-9. There were only nine. Another tried 1-2-3-4-5-6-7-8-9. Again only nine. A traveler passing by, seeing the group looking so worried, asked what was the matter. They explained saying that they had been ten, they had crossed the river but now they were only nine. "Oh! let me count said the traveler. "1-2-3-4-5-6-7-8-9-10" But he was wrong as well. And if you think he should have counted 11 you would be wrong as well.

That knowledge, that anything we can know or think, is not the way, is not news. Many religions teach the limitations of the intellect. The problem is that when people hear that the intellect is limited, and knowledge can be a barrier, they want to discard it. Many set out in their spiritual practice to have an empty mind, to suppress thoughts and become like a zombie. This is why Nansen says not knowing is a blank.

He then says something very surprising. He says, "It is like vast space." It is this statement that makes the dialogue into a koan. Conze, the Buddhologist, says that Zen is Buddhism with jokes, and koans are like jokes. Or perhaps it would be more dignified to say that koans are spiritual irony. Zen master Mumon, who compiled a collection of koans in which this koan I am commenting on appeared, used a lot of irony in his comments on the koans. For example on one occasion, speaking of Buddha, he says "Yellow faced Gotama is certainly outrageous. He turns the noble into the lowly sells dog-flesh advertised as sheep's head. Often a friend will greet another friend by saying something insulting about him. To express love and friendship in this way is often far more powerful than simply saying that one is fond of another. In irony and laughter there is always a "yes" and a "no." A master raised a stick and said, "If you call this a stick I will give you thirty blows. If you say that it is not a stick I will give you thirty blows. Now what is it?" When we are caught up in a yes no situation something deeper, that in most of us is asleep, is aroused.

Buddha said life is suffering, every day mind is suffering. Some verses called the Hymn of Jesus say, "If you knew how to suffer, you would have the power not to suffer." The word that Buddha used was "Duhkha" which means twoness, duality: yes and no, right and wrong, you and me, life and death. Koans show us how to use conflict creatively, how to see yes and no against a background of "vast space."

A monk asked a master, "How can we avoid the heat in the summer and the cold in the winter." How can we get away from everyday mind, the mind of the opposites? The master replied, "Go where there is no heat in summer, cold in winter." "Oh! gasped the monk. "Where is that?" "When it is hot, sweat! When it is cold, shiver!"

Many people feel that if they could change their life circumstances they would be happy. If they could have the right job, more money, a different spouse or no spouse, then all would be la vie en rose. Others believe that they should change themselves: become more tolerant, more loving, have better concentration. The koan says no, everything, as it is, is perfect, but you must stop seeing it as if in a mirror, as if in a dream.

Of course someone will ask how do you do this?
Wake up! Wake up!