The Book of Equanimity contains the first-ever comprehensive English commentaries on one of the most beloved classic collections of Zen teaching stories (koans), making them vividly relevant to today’s spiritual seekers and Zen students.

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“Annexan and Subtle as the Texts in the Zen Tradition, Shishin Wick’s comments on this timeless series of koans illuminate ancient wisdom for our modern scientific world. There are few teachers who could shed this kind of light for the Western reader in the twenty-first century.”
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“With the sureness of one who knows how to travel the beyond, Zen Master Shishin Wick guides us through this wonderful classic, and helps us discover in ourselves a life that is ever abundant with mystery.”
—PROFESSOR REGINALD RAY, author of Indestructible Truth

“Shishin Wick brings to this important work the depth, the precision, and the true vision of the scientist who is always ready to question everything, never satisfied with platitudes or old standards. He exemplifies the relentless clarity of the teacher challenging us to start afresh in each moment.”
—from the foreword by BERNIE GLASSMAN, author of Infinite Circle

“Wick’s brilliant book helps us crack the mystery of the Zen koan. I found it very interesting and useful, both for myself and for my Dharma students. It is a real contribution to Buddhist literature in the Western world, further opening the treasure trove of this great wisdom tradition.”
—LAMA SURYA DAS, author of Awakening the Buddha Within

“This rich, contemporary commentary invites the reader to look beyond the predictable and obvious to the depth and subtlety of a mind that is truly free.”
—JOAN HALIFAX, author of Being with Dying

“Wick’s pithy commentaries cut to the quick of the one hundred koans contained here. This book is a beacon that penetrates the haze of complications.”
—ABBOT JOHN DAIDO LOORI, author of The Zen of Creativity

GERRY SHISHIN WICK is a Dharma heir of Taizan Maezumi, founder of the Zen Center of Los Angeles. He studied with both Soto and Rinzai Zen masters, and for twenty years his understanding of hundreds of koans, including those in The Book of Equanimity, was carefully examined by Maezumi Roshi. He has been a professor in several fields, including physics, oceanography, and Buddhism, and is also the coauthor of The Great Heart Way. He lives and teaches in Lafayette, Colorado.
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THE BOOK OF EQUANIMITY

Illuminating Classic Zen Koans

Gerry Shishin Wick

Foreword by Bernie Glassman

Wisdom Publication • Boston

Acquired at wisdompubs.org
dedicated to Hakuyu Taizan Maezumi
(1931–1995)
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Attention! Master Jizo asked Hogen, “Where have you come from?” “I
pilgrimage aimlessly,” replied Hogen. “What is the matter of your pil-
grimage?” asked Jizo. “I don’t know,” replied Hogen. “Not knowing is
the most intimate,” remarked Jizo. At that, Hogen experienced great
enlightenment.

—Case 20 of the Book of Equanimity

I met Gerry Wick at the Zen Center of Los Angeles in the early 1970s, dur-
ing the time when I was studying with Taizan Maezumi Roshi. He had just
arrived in California from London, England, where he had worked as a physi-
cist and science editor for a magazine while studying Zen with Sochu Suzuki
Roshi, a disciple of Soen Nakagawa Roshi. He had received a Ph.D. in physics
from the University of California-Berkeley in the 1960s and soon began to
work at the Scripps Institution of Oceanography. At ZCLA, Maezumi Roshi
gave him the Buddhist name Shishin, which means “lion heart.”

This was the early 1970s, and hippies were far more common than sci-
entists at the Zen center. Shishin stood out. Eventually, Maezumi Roshi put
him in charge of the administration of both the Zen Center of Los Angeles
and the Kuroda Institute for the Study of Buddhism and Human Values. In
1990, Shishin Wick succeeded Maezumi Roshi in his lineage, becoming full
heir to his Dharma.

I recall during that time that Shishin wrote a scientific paper on torna-
does—not those born of the meeting of warm, moist Gulf air with cold Cana-
dian air or the dry air from the Rockies, but rather tornadoes created by cars
going speedily in different directions on the Los Angeles freeways, seeding
dramatic swings in wind patterns, which were, in fact, small tornadoes. You
might say that at that time tornadoes were also coming out of the vortex of
the Zen Center of Los Angeles, not due to freeway traffic but the traffic
going back and forth across the Pacific. Japanese and American teachers and
practitioners were bringing their Zen from Asia to America and back to Asia
again. The impact of Japanese Zen on America is clear. Important Japanese
teachers introduced the Dharma to thousands of new students in this coun-
try. And even in those days America was beginning to have some perceptible
impact on Japan. American practitioners were seen by certain Japanese
teachers largely as more sincere, energetic, and committed to realizing the
Buddha Way than their Japanese counterparts. Americans like Shishin were
invigorating the practice with fresh ideas and inquisitiveness and exploring
the very essence of Buddhism. And that caused turbulence.

This American Zen master who as a Zen student once wrote so cleanly and
scientifically about tornadoes on Los Angeles freeways now turns his sci-
entific eye to what lies at the center of the twisters of our minds, the twisters of
our lives. In the present book, Shishin provides an incisive Western com-
mentary on a collection of koans, poems, and thoughts developed in China
many centuries ago. Known as the Book of Equanimity, this twister has equa-
nimity at its core—the equanimity that arises out of the state of not knowing,
which is, as Master Jizo says in the epigraph, the most intimate.

Shishin Wick brings to this important work the depth, precision, and the
true vision of the scientist who always stands ready to question everything,
ever satisfied with platitudes or old standards. He exemplifies the relentless
clarity of the teacher challenging us to start afresh in each moment and
unabashedly explore in these koans the essence of Zen—and the essence of
our lives—in our own words, in the time, culture, and places where we find
ourselves.

After receiving Dharma transmission, Shishin moved to Colorado where
he started his own Zen center in an area known for its thunderstorms and vio-
lent weather. He is now a roshi, which is the highest designation a teacher can
receive in our lineage. Yet even now, Roshi Shishin Wick never stops ques-
tioning, never stops learning, never stops not knowing. And with great clar-
ity and elegance in this valuable and highly enjoyable commentary, he invites
us to do the same.

Bernie Glassman
Montague, Massachusetts
Fall 2004
Acknowledgments

About ten years ago when he was a student at Zen Mountain Monastery, Josh Bartok asked me about writing a book on Zen—and I promptly put his suggestion into the “I should do that some day” file. A couple of years ago when Josh, now an editor at Wisdom Publications, made the same suggestion, I had just finished giving talks on all one hundred cases of the Book of Equanimity. Josh suggested they would make a good book and helped me grind away the rough edges of those talks and shape them into short commentaries. Without his efforts and persistence, this book would continue to exist only in my “I should do that some day” file.

I especially want to thank and acknowledge my teaching partner and successor, Ilia Shinko Perez. She carefully read all one hundred commentaries and offered suggestions for improvement. We had some lively dialogues about some of the cases. Due to her efforts, many of the commentaries now read better, are more incisive, and contain more of the feminine aspects of Zen. Of course, all errors and omissions within these pages are solely my responsibility.

Some of my students assisted. I particularly want to thank Paul Gyodo Agostinelli who helped me proofread all of the translations and a number of the commentaries, and John Fugetsu Rueppel who did the bulk of the transcriptions among others.

My warm appreciation to Bernie Glassman for sharing his teachings with me over many years and for writing the foreword. I also want to acknowledge Sochu Suzuki Roshi for starting me on my practice of the Zen Way, and offer my boundless thanks to my core teacher, Taizan
Maezumi Roshi. If he had not put me through the Dharma fires, I could not have written this book.

Deep bows of gratitude to all my teachers.
Introduction

In Zen training, koans are used to liberate students from their rigid, restrictive ways of viewing themselves and the world around them and to open their eye of wisdom. One literary wag facetiously said that koans are stories that Zen masters use “to blow their students’ minds!” *Koan* literally means “public case.” In Zen, koans are usually a record of dialogues between a Zen master and his student, a section from a sutra (Buddhist scripture) or piece of Zen liturgy, or a statement by a Zen master. In the field of law, prior legal cases and decisions set precedents for how to evaluate current cases. In a somewhat analogous way, we can use koans to test our understanding against the expressions and actions of the ancient masters. When we see eye to eye with these ancient worthies the subtle meanings of the koans become revealed to us.

Formal koan study can be traced to the tenth century in China. Over the centuries the study of koans had deteriorated as a practice, becoming essentially formulaic and heavily stylized, but was revivified by Master Hakuin in eighteenth-century Japan. By Hakuin’s time, traditional “answers” were recorded and even sold. Contrary to some views, there is no fixed response to each koan, and the idea of koans having “answers” as such is absurd. In fact, some teachers have even changed their interpretation to maintain freshness or to respond to the needs of a particular student. I express that view in some of my commentaries in this collection. Koans require a whole-body response. “Correct words” without the corresponding inner experience will cause the teacher to immediately ring the bell dismissing the student.

I spent over twenty years studying with Taizan Maezumi Roshi. Much of that time was devoted to examination and appreciation of about seven hundred koans during our face-to-face encounters in the private interview (*doku-san*) room. In the system of koans presented by Maezumi Roshi, we start with
two hundred “miscellaneous” koans designed to bring the student to experi-
ential realization of oneness of all things. These koans are drawn from vari-
ous sources including traditional collections and more obscure sources. (For
my students I have decreased the number of miscellaneous koans to one hun-
dred.) Next we study the Gateless Gate which contains forty-eight koans. Then
there are the hundred koans of the Blue Cliff Record followed by the hundred
koans of the Book of Equanimity. In the present book I present these hundred
koans of the Book of Equanimity with my commentaries. Next we study the
fifty-three koans of The Transmission of Light, which detail the enlightenment
experiences of the Zen Ancestors from Shakyamuni Buddha to Master
Dogen. Next we appreciate the Five Ranks of Master Tozan with about fifty
koans and testing points. The final collection is a series of one hundred koans
based on detailed examination of the sixteen bodhisattva precepts which are
transmitted during ceremonies for both laypeople and monks when they
commit to the Way of the Buddha.

I cannot overestimate the importance of doing koan study with a quali-
fied teacher. Some Zen students pride themselves on their understanding of
koans, but unless they have been thoroughly examined by their teacher in
the dokusan room, that understanding can remain superficial.

The hundred cases in the Book of Equanimity were compiled in the twelfth
century by Master Wanshi Shokaku. He presented each koan and wrote a
verse for each one. Wanshi was a brilliant scholar who entered a monastery
at the age of eleven. Wanshi succeeded the Dharma from Tanka Shijun in the
main Soto school lineage. This collection of koans is highly revered in the
Soto School although they are not approached in the same way as koans are
in the Rinzai School, which requires face-to-face presentation with one’s
teacher. In the Soto School, the koans are approached more as liturgy to be
studied and discussed. A parallel koan collection, the Blue Cliff Record, was
compiled by Setcho Juken in the eleventh century. He compiled one hundred
koans and presented verses for each one. A contemporary of Wanshi’s named
Engo Kokugon, who is in the Rinzai lineage, wrote a preface to each of the
cases in the Blue Cliff Record and also wrote commentaries on the main case and
on Setcho’s verses. Since Engo is in the Rinzai lineage, the Blue Cliff Record is
highly esteemed in the Rinzai School, although about one-third of the koans
overlap between the two collections.

Here I’d like to quote extensively from what my grandfather in the
Dharma, Hakuun Yasutani Roshi, wrote in the last century regarding the relationship of the *Blue Cliff Record* and the *Book of Equanimity*:

Master Engo, who gave the preface and commentary to each case of the *Blue Cliff Record*, and Master Wanshi were of approximately the same generation. Both men were close Dharma friends, but whether we speak of their views regarding Zen or of their teaching policies, each had his own distinctive characteristics, and each took a position from which he did not yield an inch. Right from them the special characteristics of Soto and Rinzai Zen oozed out. I think it is most desirable that Zen students become intimately familiar with both the *Blue Cliff Record* and the *Book of Equanimity*, and make the strong points of both Rinzai Zen and Soto Zen their own.

Rinzai and Soto Zen have their respective strong points and weak points, but since strong points are liable to change into weak points, by correctly learning each kind of Zen the strong points of both are taken in, and one is saved from the easily engendered shortcomings and ill effects of both. I believe this is important. To become attached to one-sided sectarian pride and for one sect to exclude the other are things with which I find it difficult to concur.

In stating, “I put samadhi [single-pointed meditative concentration] foremost and wisdom afterwards,” Master Wanshi promoted the cultivation of samadhi power (*joriki*) through energetic sitting, but of course he also stressed seeing one’s nature, attaining enlightenment, as is clear when we consider the appreciative verses in the *Book of Equanimity*.

As a contrast to this, in stating, “I put wisdom foremost and samadhi afterwards,” Master Engo settles beforehand the problem of seeing one’s nature and attaining enlightenment, and follows up with the cultivation of samadhi power as his method. In such fashion the policies and emphases regarding Zen were utterly different. But it seems that their Dharma relationship was always warm-hearted. Wanshi on the eve of his death left his affairs entirely in Engo’s hands, and Engo on his part responded by discharging his trust well. It is my hope that we too, having such wise men as our mirror, in utter freedom may work at guiding others, by discarding sectarian pride and leaving one-
sided views, and by learning the strong points of both Soto and Rin-
zai. Then, each may devise his own characteristic methods of guid-
ance without imitating anyone, in accord with the times and adapting
to the country.

Almost one hundred years after Wanshi compiled the koans and the
verses for the Book of Equanimity, Master Bansho Gyoshu added a preface to
each case, as well as “capping phrases” (jakugo) for each line of the koan and
the verse. A capping phrase is a one-line verse that comments on the line of
the koan or the verse. He also wrote longer commentaries on both the case
and the verse. Since Bansho lived at Equanimity Monastery at the time, the
entire collection became known as the Book of Equanimity.

In this book I present Master Wanshi’s main case (the koan) and his verse,
as well as the preface by Master Bansho. These translations come primarily
from Taizan Maezumi Roshi working with Dana Fraser. The commentaries
in this volume are entirely mine and I take full responsibility for them. You
can find Bansho’s capping phrases and commentaries in the Book of Serenity
translated by Thomas Cleary.

When I studied these koans with Maezumi Roshi we used the Japanese
translations of all the Zen masters’ names. There is a trend in present-day
Zen books to use the proper Chinese transliterations of these names. For
example Master Joshu in Japanese is called Master Zhaozhou in Chinese and
Ummon (Japanese) is Yunmen (Chinese). I spent many years becoming inti-
mately familiar with Master Joshu. Quite frankly, I do not know
Zhaozhou—even though Joshu’s Chinese contemporaries probably
addressed him this way. Therefore I have used the Japanese romanization in
this volume. I am just too stubborn and too old to learn and integrate the
Chinese names. For those who expect and prefer the Chinese names, I apol-
gize and I have provided an appendix that cross-references the Japanese
names and Chinese ones. The appendix also contains the Sanskrit names of
some of the earlier Buddhas, bodhisattvas, and Ancestors from India as well
as reference to modern teachers mentioned in the commentaries.

ON THE STUDY OF KOANS
A koan is a public case in the sense that it is brought forward as an example
of a dialogue to help us elevate our practice and understanding. The more we
can understand the content, the meaning, the purpose of that dialogue the more we can deepen our realization of our own practice. Koan study with a koan teacher is a skillful means that is unique to Zen. Like any skillful means, one should not become attached to it as a device, but use it and let it go.

In order to penetrate a koan, the student must drop away attachments to images, beliefs, and projections. As Dogen Zenji said, “To study the Buddha Way is to study the self and to study the self is to forget the self.” He is talking about the small ego-grasping self that hinders our free functioning in life. In order to drop that away, we have to see the fundamental nature of our mind and our self.

The dialogue between Bodhidharma and Eka, who would become the second Zen Ancestor, illustrates the nature of mind. This koan appears as Case 41 in the Gateless Gate. Eka sat out in the cold waiting for instruction and one night after it had snowed, in order to show his determination he cut off his arm. At that point Bodhidharma asked him what it was he wanted. Eka said, “My mind is not at rest, please pacify it.” Bodhidharma said, “Bring me your mind and I will pacify it for you.” And Eka said, “After searching exhaustively, I find the mind is ungraspable.” Bodhidharma said finally, “Then I have pacified it for you.”

One essential point about koan study is to reflect on the dialogue and determine exactly what is being said. If you are assigned a koan to study, the first thing you should do is memorize it and think about it. Just don’t imagine deep realization will immediately come to you in a flash of light. Think about the koan. What are the people in it saying? What is motivating them? What is motivating you? Which line in the koan is most important? In the example above, Master Eka says, “Mind is ungraspable.” He is not saying, “I cannot grasp the mind” but that the very nature of mind is that it is ungraspable. He is not saying, “I looked exhaustively and I can’t find it.” What he is saying is, “I have looked exhaustively and it is unfindable.” This is a crucial difference. He is not saying, “Boy, I don’t think I will ever find this thing”—rather, he is saying, “I am telling you, this thing can’t be found!”

So, what is the purpose of koans? Why do we study them? Our practice is to examine the very nature of the ignorance that causes us to grab onto the self—not only the self as we perceive it but also the self in relation to everything else.

There is a notion among Zen students that they should not use their rea-
soning faculties when practicing meditation. That is true when you are focusing on the breath or “just sitting” (a practice called shikantaza). When I first started doing koan study I imagined, “When I sit, I shouldn’t be thinking.” I am telling you from my experience if you don’t think about your koans, whether you are sitting or not sitting, you are not going to penetrate them. Of course, thinking alone will not reveal a koan’s subtle meaning. You need to empty your mind of thoughts in order to do that, but thinking will help you set the proper course. I believe thinking in meditative disciplines has been given a bum rap. But be very clear: I am not referring to egocentric or self-grasping thinking—that kind of thinking will not help you.

With each koan, you have to know what the problem is you are trying to solve. If you don’t know what the problem is, you don’t know what target you are shooting at. So what are you aiming at? What’s your purpose? What’s your goal? Ultimately the goal of Zen is “no goal”—but you have to have a goal first in order to realize no-goal. And in koan study, the goal is to penetrate each koan as thoroughly as possible.

Even though the function of the brain is to think, there are moments when you don’t think, or at least you are unaware of your thinking. My favorite example is downhill skiers. They go eighty–ninety miles per hour down a slope of snow with these two little pieces of wood or plastic on their feet. What happens if they think, “I am supposed to lift my right leg and bend my ankle this way and lean into the hill”? By the time they think it, they will be rolling down the hill! How about a gymnast or platform-diver? If they are thinking during their maneuvers, they will make a mistake and possibly even come to great harm! In Zen practice as in these other disciplines, you just have to train and train and train so that you are not thinking at certain times. You can be aware without thinking and without being self-conscious. Beyond the realm of thought, I am fascinated by how one comes to a realization of the meaning of a koan and how one integrates it or embodies it.

In trying to solve problems of physics, Albert Einstein didn’t just always think about the problem at hand. He would feel bodily sensations and would move these sensory patterns around with his body and see how they fit together. And once he saw some patterns that fell into place, he would test them. He would try and devise mathematical equations that explained these patterns.

Another scientist named August Kekule discovered the structure of benzene, one of the most important structures in organic chemistry, through a
dream. The structure is in the form of a ring, a circle of six carbon atoms. This organic structure had puzzled scientists for a long time. Kekule wrote, “I turned my chair to the fire [after having worked on the problem for some time] and dozed. Again the atoms were gamboling before my eyes. This time the smaller groups kept modestly to the background. My mental eye, rendered more acute by repeated vision of this kind, could not distinguish larger structures, of manifold conformation; long rows, sometimes more closely fitted together; all twining and twisting in snakelike motion. But look! What was that? One of the snakes had seized hold of its own tail, and the form whirled mockingly before my eyes. As if by a flash of lighting I awoke…. Let us learn to dream, gentlemen.”* Then he had to go back to his lab and he had to prove that the ring structure was it.

In Case 39 in this collection and in Case 7 of the Gateless Gate, a monk asks Joshu in all earnestness, “I have just entered the monastery, I beg you master, please give me instruction.” It doesn’t say a monk “casually” asked Joshu. “In all earnestness” is important. And Joshu asked, “Have you eaten your gruel yet?” The monk said, “Yes, I have.” Then Joshu said, “Then wash the bowls.” And the monk attains some realization. Now I ask you, are they talking about eating rice gruel and washing bowls? On one level they certainly are—but there is more there as well. You must open your Dharma eye to realize your Buddha mind. In every one of these koans realization of your true self is the topic on some level.

Einstein was once asked about his creativity and he touched upon the subject of patience. He said the search may take years of groping in the dark; hence the ability to hold on to a problem for a long time and not be destroyed by repeated failure is necessary for any serious researcher. The same sentiment applies aptly to koan study.

The best koans are those that come from your own life experience. The koans in this collection should not be approached as a conversation between two men or women taking place a thousand years ago. Every one of these koans, if you take it correctly, is part of your life experience right now—otherwise they are just dead pieces of literature. Make each your own experience. This is your life.

*Arthur Koestler in The Act of Creation
When I was working at the Scripps Institution of Oceanography, we were developing an apparatus that would allow a deep-sea diver to remain warm. We were testing it in a tank that was about forty feet deep containing deep cold ocean water that was continually circulating. I was a subject in the tests. With probes all over my body, I went to the bottom of the tank while my core body temperature, blood pressure, and other variables were measured. While I was floating near the bottom of the tank, I thought of Case 43 in the Blue Cliff Record, “Tozan’s Hot and Cold”:

A monk in all earnestness asked Master Tozan, “How do you avoid the discomfort of hot and cold?” And Master Tozan said, “Go to that place where there is no hot and cold.” And the monk said, “Where is that place?” And the Master said, “When you are hot, be hot and when you are cold, be cold.”

“When you are cold, be cold.” Since I was not wearing a wet suit, it was very cold. I asked myself, “What’s cold?” I totally experienced the cold. With each breath my whole universe was a feeling of cold penetrating my whole body.

Most of the subjects had to leave the water after twenty minutes because their body temperature dropped too low. I sat there concentrating on the cold and after an hour they finally told me to come up. My body temperature had barely dropped. The naval officer who was running the tests said, “What were you doing down there?” I replied, “Nothing.” But after that experience I didn’t get cold for the longest time. I really understood “Tozan’s Hot and Cold.”

So when you sit and you feel that you understand the content of the koan and you have examined each line of dialogue carefully, a response pops up. Test it. Sometimes a response will pop up and you know that that’s it. Aha! That’s it! Most of the time, you have to think about it.

Consider the way Gandhi formed his political strategy in India. All of his lieutenants would express their opinions to Gandhi. He would then retire and do his meditation. While he was meditating, a strategy integrating the important information would come up. By emptying himself of thoughts, it arose.

You can take this approach to koan study and apply it to your life in general. When you have a problem, think about it. Then think about it some more. And then think about it and after you’ve thought all you can think...
about it, then just think “non-thinking.” In “Bendowa” ("The Wholehearted Way") Master Dogen, referring to a dialogue from Yakusan Igen, wrote, "Think not-thinking. How do you think not-thinking? Non-thinking! This in itself is the essential art of zazen." When you touch the origin of thinking, this is not-thinking. Our practice is neither about thinking nor non-thinking. As Case 20 in the Book of Equanimity says, “Not knowing is the most intimate thing.” Let go of your cherished opinions and cultivate the mind of “not-knowing” and the True Dharma will appear.

Make sure that your insight agrees with the Dharma. Dharma means the teachings of the Buddhas and the patriarchs and the Zen masters. The Dharma also is the reality of our life itself. The Dharma means the grass is green and the sky is blue. Mountains are high and valleys are low. The Dharma is the words exclaimed by the Buddha upon attaining enlightenment: “I and all sentient beings and the great earth simultaneously attained enlightenment.” Having a conceptual understanding is not sufficient. You need to experience it. Experiencing your Buddha Nature eliminates attachments to self-grasping ignorance.

If your insight does not agree with the Dharma, start over again. That’s what Einstein would do. When he worked out the mathematical equations based on his bodily patterns, he would check them against details of reality. If according to his new theory there would be, for instance, no gravity created by massive objects, he would have to reject it. Reality says when you release something it falls down. So he would have to start over again.

Penetrate each of the koans in this collection—and in your life itself—with every fiber in your body. And allow each koan to penetrate into you. Take each one as personally as possible. Using nonjudgmental awareness developed in your meditation, never stop examining your insights and understanding.

My own study of koans is not finished. Life is a continuous koan.

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CASE 1

The World-Honored One Ascends the Platform

PREFACE TO THE ASSEMBLY
Close the gate and snooze—that’s how to treat a superior person. Reflection, abbreviation, and elaboration are used for middling and inferior ones. How can you stand for someone to ascend the high seat and scowl? If anyone around here doesn’t agree, step forward. I have no doubts about him.

MAIN CASE
Attention! One day the World-Honored One ascended the platform and took his seat. Manjushri struck the sounding post and said: “When you realize the Dharma-King’s Dharma, the Dharma-King’s Dharma is just as is.” At that, the World-Honored One descended from the platform.

APPRECIATORY VERSE
Do you see the true manner of the primal stage?
Mother Nature goes on weaving warp and woof;
the woven old brocade contains the images of spring—
nothing can be done about the Spring God’s (Manjushri) outflowing.

Attention! When the Buddha, also known as the World-Honored One, ascends the platform it means he’s ready to give a discourse on the Dharma. In this koan, Manjushri, the bodhisattva of wisdom who is renowned for cutting delusion with Dharma words, announces the beginning of the talk with the statement: “When you realize the Dharma-King’s Dharma, the Dharma-King’s Dharma is just as is.” And then, the Buddha descends the platform; his discourse is over. What more could he say? Even Manjushri’s announcement is
unnecessary. He's saying too much; he's "leaking" or as the verse says he is "outflowing."

When you truly understand the Dharma, it's just thus, just this; it's as is. All kinds of words and phrases have been invented in Zen to express thusness or "as-is"-ness, but none are needed. Don't add anything extra. Just let everything be as it is. That's liberation. But letting everything be as is, is difficult for us because we're always trying to fiddle around with things, always adding something, wishing something were taken away. We're always putting another head atop our own.

I know people who want to be a lion but feel just like a frightened kitten—and not only that, they feel like a frightened kitten frightened about feeling like a frightened kitten! But the Dharma-King's Dharma is as is; if you're frightened, be frightened, leave it at that and don't add anything extra.

What does it mean to let it all be and let it all go? And what about when you can't let it go, what then? Well, if you're holding on, hold on. That's liberation too. Let the Dharma-King's Dharma be as is.

This seems straightforward, but the subtlety comes in each moment: Each moment, how do you practice the Dharma-King's Dharma? And let me ask you this: Why do you practice Zen? If you think you're going to become something else, you're fooling yourself. If you think that you don't need to practice zazen because everything is perfect as it is, that is an erroneous view.

The first line of the verse says, "Do you see the true manner of the primal stage?" This is inviting us to realize the truth of ultimate reality. Is that ultimate reality the World-Honored One ascending the platform, or is it the World-Honored One descending the platform? If you let the light of ultimate reality blind your eye, it's hard to see. If it does not blind your eye, then it's hard to let go. If you see it, don't dwell there.

The Dharma-King's Dharma is as is. If you continue to be frightened and to maintain your judgments about being frightened, then you are not truly feeling fright. You are holding on to your opinions. By accepting your experience without judgments, you allow transformation to take place. I cannot count the times I heard Maezumi Roshi say, "Appreciate your life." Appreciating your life means that the Dharma-King's Dharma is just as is. From that place you can embrace yourself and appreciate yourself. It is not a matter of being a superior or inferior person. It is not a matter of Manjushri's outflowing. Just let everything be as is and appreciate every moment of this life as the life of the Dharma-King.
CASE 2

Bodhidharma’s Vast Emptiness

PREFACE TO THE ASSEMBLY
Benka’s three offerings did not prevent his being punished: If a luminous jewel were thrown at them, few are the men who would not draw their swords. For an impromptu guest, there is not an impromptu host; he’s provisionally acceptable but not absolutely acceptable. If you can’t grasp rare, valuable treasure, let’s toss in a dead cat’s head and see.

MAIN CASE
Attention! Emperor Wu of Ryo asked the great master Bodhidharma, “What is the ultimate meaning of the holy truth of Buddhism?” Bodhidharma replied, “Vast emptiness. No holiness.” The Emperor asked, “Who stands here before me?” Bodhidharma replied, “I don’t know.” The Emperor was baffled. Thereafter, Bodhidharma crossed the river, arrived at Shorin and faced the wall for nine years.

APPRECIATORY VERSE
Emptiness, no holiness—
the questioner’s far off.
Gain is to swing the axe and not harm the nose;
loss is to drop the pot and not look back.
In solitude he sits cool at Shorin;
in silence the Right Decree’s fully revealed.
The autumn’s lucid and the moon’s a turning frosty wheel;
the Milky Way’s pale, and the Big Dipper’s handle hangs low.
In line the robe and bowl handed on to descendents henceforth are medicine to men and devas.
Emperor Wu had heard about Bodhidharma, the Indian monk who brought Zen to China in the sixth century, and summoned him to his court. In preparation for meeting with this great bodhisattva, the emperor must have asked his advisors what was the single most important question to ask a great monk. When he meets Bodhidharma, he presents that question. Yet Bodhidharma’s answer to him—“Vast emptiness. No holiness.”—surprises and confuses the emperor so utterly that he wonders if the man before him is the great and learned monk he had expected and not an imposter—hence his second question. And Bodhidharma’s thunderous reply is, simply, “I don’t know.”

What is this vast emptiness? What is this “I don’t know”? What does empty mean? It doesn’t mean blackness or nihilism or nothingness, and it isn’t the emptiness we complain about when we say “I feel empty.” Everything is impermanent; nothing is fixed. One’s own form is empty of any fixed thing. Realizing this emptiness, experiencing it directly, is one of the most important aspects of our practice. There is no fixed thing that is the self—nothing to grasp onto, no firm ground upon which to stand, no right understanding to attain. As soon as you think you’ve grabbed “it,” you have lost “it.” Realizing “it” directly, tremendous freedom is manifest.

When self-aggrandizing thoughts arise—or even negative thoughts that affirm the illusion of an independent self—we grab onto them instead of just letting them go. Why do we grab onto them? If we didn’t reinforce the illusion of a fixed self, what would we be? What would be left?

There is an old Zen expression that is appropriate here: “Even the water melting from the snow-capped peaks finds its way to the ocean.” It finds its way without even knowing the direction and against all obstacles! We think that we need to control everything. Out of ignorance we keep affirming this false self to feel secure and to feel that we are in control of our life.

We believe that we are the content of our thoughts (and our opinions, beliefs, feelings, and reactions). We resist seeing that we ourselves are “vast emptiness” and thus are denying our deep unlimited nature. The Buddha realized that there is no gap between ourselves and others. We are all one body. And by not recognizing who we are, we’re creating a chasm between ourselves and others that is greater than the Grand Canyon, and being unable to cross this chasm makes us miserable. But even so, we feel secure in our own misery because it is familiar to us, it makes us feel in control.

Commenting on this case, one ancient Zen master said, “Leaving aside
the ultimate meaning for the moment, what do you want with the holy
truth?” What are you going to do with it? Another master said, “If you just
end attachments, there’s no holy understanding.” The Third Ancestor said,
“Don’t seek after the truth, just don’t cherish your opinions.” Just let the
clouds of delusion disperse. If you don’t cherish your delusions, then wisdom
will shine through naturally. One of the scriptures says, “If you create an
understanding of holiness, you will succumb to all errors.” How many wars
have been fought in the name of an understanding of what is holy? What
kind of holiness is that? If you create an understanding of holiness, if you
know—right there, you’re stuck in the mud. As soon as you know, that know-
ing becomes dualistic, and as soon as it becomes dualistic it no longer cor-
responds to reality.

Yasutani Roshi said, “When you make Bodhidharma’s ‘I don’t know’ your
own, it does not break into consciousness. If you know it, at a single stroke
it’s gone.” When you make it your own, it’s a part of your flesh, bones, and
blood. But if you describe it, it becomes something else.

Relating to this case, Yasutani Roshi wrote this poem:

Holy reality, emptiness.
The man, unknowing.
Spring breeze and autumn moon speak heavenly truth.
Reverent monks building temples to no merit.
Emperor Wu, how could you know the willows’ new green?

How could you know the willows’ new green? You’re so busy trying to fig-
ure it out, you’re missing the buds under your own nose.

So what is this not knowing? There are all kinds of “I don’t know.” In this
case, this “I don’t know” snatches everything away. We can point at it, but
how can we really express it? It is like a mute serving as a messenger to us.
But if we really open ourselves up, we can receive the message nonetheless.
But what is given? What is received? What is maintained?

When Bodhidharma left the emperor, he spent nine years facing a wall.
What was he doing for those nine years? If you understand this koan, you can
answer without hesitation.
CASE 3

An Invitation for the Patriarch

PREFACE TO THE ASSEMBLY
By the activity existing before even a hint of this kalpa, a blind turtle faces the fire. By the phrase that's transmitted outside the scriptures, a mortar's rim spouts a flower. Tell me: is there something to receive, maintain, read, and recite?

MAIN CASE
Attention! The ruler of a country in Eastern India invited the Twenty-Seventh Ancestor, Hannyatara, for a midmorning meal. The ruler asked him, “Why don't you read the sutras?” The Ancestor replied, “This poor follower of the Way, when breathing in does not dwell in the realm of skandhas, and when breathing out is not caught up in the many externals. Always do I thus turn a hundred thousand million billion rolls of sutras.”

APPRECIATORY VERSE
Cloud rhino sports with the moon and glows embracing its beams, wooden horse plays in the spring, unfettered and fleet. Beneath his brows, two chill blue eyes—what need to read sutras as though piercing oxhide! Bright white mind transcends vast kalpas, a hero’s strength tears through nested enclosures. The subtle round hub-hole turns marvelous activities. When Kanzan forgets the road whence he came, Jittoku will lead him by hand to return.
Hannyatara, Bodhidharma’s teacher and the twenty-seventh Ancestor in our lineage, doesn’t dwell in the realm of form, sensation, perception, conception, and consciousness—the skandhas—and so he doesn’t get caught in a notion of a fixed separate self. Inhaling and exhaling, there is no inside or outside. Each breath reveals the sutra.

Sutra usually refers to the teachings of the Buddha, but a sutra could be anything that is undeniably true. With each breath Hannyatara revolves the sutras. Breathing in, breathing out, the fundamental holy truth of the primary principle is revealed.

Hannyatara turns a nice phrase: “This poor follower of the Way.” To be poor is to have nothing and to hold onto nothing. Being poor in that way gives us the richness of not being constrained by external conditions.

This is a prescription for all of our dis-ease: Breathe in without attaching to internals, breathe out without attaching to externals. When we do that, we manifest clear, unclouded vision. But if we add anything to that simple practice, it becomes something else entirely. To learn simple breathing in and breathing out takes steady years of meditation. Breathe in and do not create a false self; breathe out and don’t perturb the world or be perturbed by the world—the ultimate meaning of the holy truth is revealed.

The verse says “A hero’s strength tears through nested enclosures.” Breathing in, you’re a minister. Breathing out, you’re a general. These “nested enclosures” are all of the cloaks that we wear. “I am a teacher.” “I am a Buddhist.” “I am an artist.” Breathe in and you see past the teacher. Breathe out and you see beyond the artist. The hero’s strength tears through these wrappers that we put around ourselves. Each time we breathe it is a new sutra.

In this way whatever you’re doing, you’re revolving the sutras. Picking the weeds, changing a diaper, and making a flower arrangement are a hundred thousand million billion rolls of sutras. Completely become breathing in and breathing out and that’s all there is. In that moment, where’s Hannyatara? If you realize “this poor follower of the Way” you are free to come and go. But if you don’t, you’re using counterfeit money to buy stock in a corrupt corporation.
CASE 4

The World-Honored One Points to the Earth

PREFACE TO THE ASSEMBLY
When a speck of dust is raised, the great earth is fully contained in it. It’s very well to open new territory and extend your lands with horse and spear. Who is this person who can be master in any place and meet the source in everything?

MAIN CASE
Attention! When the World-Honored One was walking with his disciples he pointed to the ground and said, “It would be good to erect a temple here.” The god Indra took a blade of grass and stuck it in the ground and said, “The temple has been erected.” The World-Honored One smiled faintly.

APPRECIATORY VERSE
On the hundred grass-tips, boundless spring—
taking what’s at hand, use it freely.
Buddha’s sixteen foot golden body of manifold merit spontaneously extending a hand, enters the red dust—
within the dust he can be host
coming from another world, naturally he’s a guest.
Wherever you are be content with your role—
dislike not those more adept than you.

Part of experiencing growth in our life requires developing a larger vision unconstrained by our usual, limited mind, like Indra and Buddha. Doing so requires great awareness. We all have blind spots, and we project our world
view from those dark places. That projection inevitably distorts our relations with others, with the world, and with ourselves. We need to practice awareness in order to develop clarity and to perceive the difference between reality and distortions. We also need perseverance because without it we will not generate the heat necessary to melt our self-grasping ignorance.

Suppose you saw a black raven flying by, and everybody in the room said, “That’s not a black raven. That’s a white snowy egret.” You’d say, “No it’s not. It’s a black raven!” “No, everybody here except you says it’s a snowy egret.” You might see certain things with the clarity developed from your Zen practice, and yet everyone is telling you something else. This often happens when you visit close relatives. Someone might say, “This Zen stuff, sitting on the cushion all these hours—it’s a total waste of time!” What do you say? Whenever visitors would say something argumentative to him, Maezumi Roshi would give them space for their opinions. He would respond, “It could be so.”

The verse says, “Taking what’s at hand, use it freely.” Just put aside all of your ideas, standards, and judgments, then look at the world with your larger vision and see what arises. How can you manifest the sixteen foot golden body of the Buddha? How can you erect a temple from a blade of grass? The Bible says that your body is your temple. A piece of grass is your temple too. All dharmas in the ten directions are your body and your temple. But, as Master Bansho says in commenting on this case, “Repairs won’t be easy.”

The verse also says: “Wherever you are, be contented with your role. Don’t dislike those that are more adept than you.” No matter how good you are there is always somebody better. No matter how bad you are there is always somebody worse. How can we be everything that we want to be? Everywhere life is sufficient. Just be who you are, and don’t restrict it.