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Every Day is a Fine Day

It was a nasty day. It had been raining all day. I had been waiting to play golf all week, and now all plans for golf had to be cancelled. I was in a bad mood. All I could think of was, "Why did it have to rain today?" Suddenly Gensho walked into the living room, all drenched with rain, and with a big smile shouted, "Every day is a fine day." I remember that I said nothing to his exuberant comment. On the contrary—I was irritated, thinking, "How can it be a fine day when it's raining cats and dogs and I can't play golf." This incident occurred in 1974 at Claremont. Ever since that day, on numerous occasions, I have heard Roshi Keido Fukushima use this phrase—"Every Day is a Fine Day"—in his talks on Zen. Now that I understand the Zen import of this phrase, I have often greeted my students in my classes on a cold, wintry day in Ohio with the remark, "Every day is a fine day." It presents an opportunity for a good discussion. As for me, I can cancel a tee-time for a golf game without getting a headache.

So, what does Zen have to do with the weather? The Roshi explains that it was Ummon (864 - 949 C.E.), a T'ang dynasty Zen master in China, who was fond of using this phrase. Keido has made it his phrase because it gives an insight into Zen life. The average person is not free to embrace life "as it is." We always look at life dualistically, in terms of "good" and "bad." A rainy day may be bad for a golfer, but a beautiful day for a farmer. On the other hand, too much sun might be bad for both of them. The inability to transcend this dualism produces suffering. It could be physical or psychological. When I could not play golf due to rain on that day in California, it made me angry, frustrated, anxious, unfriendly, moody, and withdrawn. Besides, it gave me a headache. This is a relatively minor problem com-

pared to some serious events that life presents to us. What if we lose a loved one? How does it affect us?

Zen teaches us to be free from dualities in order to be what we are meant to be. The real question is—why do we view life dualistically, in terms of "good" and "bad"? Roshi Fukushima explains that it is due to "ego." Ego veils reality from its true essence (which Buddhism explains in terms of non-essence). Rather, it distorts reality in an attempt to perceive what it wants to perceive, not *what is*. In the Taoist tradition, it is likened to the carving of the "uncarved block"—the symbol for the Tao. Lao Tzu (6th century B.C.E.) warned his disciples not to carve the block lest they change the Tao. This is also discussed by Shankara (788 - 820 C.E.), one of the great philosophers of India. He discussed this in the context of *maya* (temporary reality) and its relation to Brahman (ultimate Reality). He warned against the problem of "superimposition" (*vivartavada*). He was concerned that living in *maya* (phenomenal reality), *jiva* (ego-self) superimposes its own interpretation of reality onto reality. Thus, Brahman remains hidden, and *maya* is viewed as ultimate. Buddha viewed this as the problem of "ignorant craving," which is the cause of suffering. One can argue that "ego" is necessary for self-preservation. Freud viewed the function of the ego as a mediator between the super-ego and the id. It provided a balance between the two extremes. In Zen, as in Buddhism as a whole, ego is perceived to be an artificial condition. It does not have a true identity. It is the creation of the mind.

For Roshi Fukushima, in order to enjoy a "free" life, one must become a person of "no-ego." He explains: "This is what in Japan we call *mu-no-hito* [a person of *mu*]. *Mu* refers to 'no-ego.' When you become a person of *mu*, you can *adjust* to bad and good things freely. You can *adapt* to all conditions without worrying about the consequences freely. It also means that you can *accept* the good and the bad freely." An average person (person of ego) wants to accept only the good of his own interpretation and avoid the bad of his own interpretation. In the process, s/he misses both.

I once asked the Roshi, "Should we not avoid the bad and do what is good?" His answer reflected the notion that Zen is not antinomian.[2] "Of course Zen believes in the *dharma* [ethics]," he said, "but for Zen it is the question of how one arrives at *dharma*." An ordinary person accepts the good (*dharma*) without transcending the dualism of good and bad. This is the sign of ego. Of course, Zen condemns what is bad, and embraces what is good, but only after having transcended both. The ability to distinguish the "good" as good and the "bad" as bad comes after the Zen awakening. Thus, merely believing or understanding the necessity to "transcend" is not enough. Zen calls for an "experience."

When I spent an extended period of time in the *sodo* (monk's quarters) at Tofukuji, I discovered that becoming *mu* (*mu-no-hito*) was the main preoccupation of the training monks. During the first year of their three years of minimum training to become a priest, they were constantly hammered with the notion of becoming *mu* (an ego-less person). The Roshi explained that when the monks first enter the monastery, they have often never heard of the term *mu*. When they begin the *koan* study, the first *koan* they are likely to be given is "Joshu's *mu*." For weeks they can be observed asking each other, "*Mu*? What in the world is *mu*?" Once they understand it, they are encouraged to experience it. This is known as "becoming *mu*." Once they become *mu*, life changes; they develop a higher perspective and understand the dualistic nature of life. The Roshi was emphatic in saying, "In the monastery we work very hard together to generate the experience of *mu* in our monks. This is the first step in understanding Zen." Indeed, I was able to see how the monks in the monastery lived the lives of ego-less selves.

[2] Antinomianism (*anti*, against; *nomos*, law): the term is used to designate freedom from religious law or external regulations to human living. In a negative sense it implies that if one experiences *satori* (enlightenment), one is no longer subjected to *dharma* (religious law). Keido does not hold this view.

It reflected in their acts of compassion towards each other and towards me. "That is the key," I thought, "When ego leaves, the vacuum is filled with compassion." Later I learned that although it is a mental experience, it has a physical dimension as well. One monk describes this experience as "feeling the compassion in the *hara* [solar plexis]." When I was leaving Tofukuji in November 2001, the Roshi offered me a box containing a gift. Inside the box was a ceramic teacup with the Roshi's own calligraphy. It read, "*Mu* [in Japanese character] for Dr. Ishwar." I was deeply moved. The Roshi had a good laugh.

The Roshi remarks that the teaching of *mu* (no-ego) is not peculiar to Zen. First, it comes out of the teachings of Sakyamuni Buddha (563 - 483 B.C.E.). Second, it is also found in the world's other great religions. In the teachings of the Buddha, the Four Noble Truths, which identify the cause and cure of suffering, the problem of ego is at the heart of Buddha's discussion. The second Noble Truth, which identifies "ignorant craving" as the cause of suffering, automatically implies that cravings are linked with ego. Consequently the control of cravings is impossible without the control of ego. Within the Theravada tradition, which was formulated after the death of the Buddha, when the elders of the tradition set forth certain doctrines of Buddhism, they included *anatta* (no-self) as a part of the doctrine of Three Signs.[3] *Anatta* was further explained by the doctrine of *skandha*s, which suggests that what is perceived as "self" is the ever-changing interaction of five aggregates. The *skandha*s do not have an independent reality of their own since they are constantly changing. One of the imports of this doctrine is that if there is no permanent self, there is no permanent ego. Some Buddhist writers have gone so far as to say that ego is a pure illusion; it does not exist. *Nirvana* (no more burning), then, in the Theravada tradition, is a state of extinction of all

[3] In Theravada Buddhism, the Three Signs are: *anatta* (no-self), *anicca* (impermanence), and *dukkha* (suffering).

desires. However, this extinction is not reserved for an after-death experience only. *Nirvana* can be experienced while a person is still living. If the Buddha could do it, so can the lay people.

The problem of ego is also recognized in other religions like Christianity, Hinduism, and Islam. Jesus' admonitions "to deny yourself to find yourself," and "to become like a child to inherit the kingdom of God," point in this direction. Furthermore, his own confrontation with Satan in the wilderness in which he defeated Satan can be compared with Siddhartha's battle with Mara.[4] In both cases they were victorious over their own egotistical affirmations. In Hinduism, from the *Upanishad*s to the *Bhagavadgita*, there is a clear indication that ego hides the true nature of God. The yoga tradition is a clear example of how without self-control the experience of *samadhi* is an impossibility. Within Islam, the Sufi tradition clearly states that *fana* is the highest experience where all individuality (including ego) is lost in God. Needless to say, the mystical traditions within all world religions have addressed the problem of ego, and have found it to be an impediment to spiritual experience. However, within the Zen tradition, the extinguishing of ego or the experience of *satori* is not perceived as mystical. Roshi Fukushima suggests, "There is nothing mystical about Zen. Those people who are outside the tradition, and who have not had an awakening, envision the experience as mystical. For Zen, the experiences are merely *natural*. There is nothing mystical about them."

During my discussions with the Roshi, I wanted to know how one controls or extinguishes the ego. I was concerned that the metaphysical solution of the problem that "ego is merely 'illusory' and therefore do not attach to it," may not satisfy an average individual. For us the problem is real. The Roshi agreed and

[4] For a description of Jesus' temptations, see the gospel according to Matthew 4:1-10.

pointed out that in Zen there are practical suggestions to handle the problem. Of course knowing the tradition and the development of Buddhism may help to understand the problem, but to experience "ego-lessness," one must do something. "The primary exercise in Zen to get rid of ego is *zazen*," he said. "Where do the desires and ego originate?" he asked. "They originate in our minds." *Zazen* is a way to empty the mind. It is no more than that. It is a way to penetrate into the unconscious, "where the seeds of all evil lie," he continued.

The chanting of the *mantra* is another way. Traditional Buddhism puts a great deal of emphasis on chanting the *sutra*s. Some of the benefits are described in meritorious ways—to appease the souls of the dead, to gain good karma, etc. But chanting has another function that is very practical. "In chanting one loses oneself in the act itself. There is a loss of consciousness of 'I,' 'me,' and 'mine,'" explains the Roshi. At Tofukuji, *sutra* chanting begins very early in the morning, soon after the wake-up bell at 3:00 a.m. I recall how hesitant I was to participate in this ritual, not because it was so early in the morning, but because I did not understand the language. However after several days of participation, which included merely listening to the monks on my part, I began to enjoy my participation. The rhythm of the wooden drum, the sound of the gong, and the sound of chanting began to penetrate my whole being. Often I lost track of the time. Something in me was lost momentarily.

Although *zazen* and chanting are primary means of experiencing the loss of self, *koan* meditation is equally important. In the Rinzai sect of Zen, much significance is attached to *koan* meditation. The Roshi explains: "When an answer to the *koan* comes, it is not through the rational mind which operates dualistically. It comes when the individual can tap into another level of reality and shut off one's own ego self."

I asked the Roshi if the collecting of the alms that monks did on a regular basis could function as a deterrent to nurtur-

ing ego. He responded by saying, "Many people call this ritual 'begging.' It is not. It is not easy to go out and ask people to give you something. It is a form of meditation. Yes, a young person with a strong ego cannot do it. It is an exercise in reducing ego." I understood what the Zen master meant. I had followed the Tofukuji monks in the streets surrounding the monastery and taken some pictures. I wanted to participate in their rounds around town, but could not bring myself to do it. Soon I learned that only monks could go on the collection rounds.

Furthermore, one of the basic requirements to become a monk was to shave the head. Traditionally in eastern cultures, hair has been viewed as a symbol of vanity. In Theravada Buddhism (which is very much like Zen), when a person's head is shaved, he is made to hold a few pieces of hair in his hand as a reminder of the control of pride and vanity. Receiving a monk's robe, giving up one's family, giving up one's given name, getting rid of possessions, sleeping on the floor, eating simple food, keeping up with the monastic vows—all such things are designed for the purpose of creating a new being, a being that will master his ego.

Generally we think of the problem of ego confined to an individual. In a lecture given at the College of Wooster in 2001, Roshi Fukushima, while discussing the problems created by the ego, addressed the issue of "national ego." He emphasized that nations often develop a unique sense of pride and become oppressive towards others. That kind of chauvinism can be a hindrance to world peace. He asked his audience to struggle against this national pride. He pointed out that in the past Japan was victimized by national pride and paid a heavy price for it. He warned that many industrial nations today are faced with this problem. Whether it is in the realm of economics, military, or culture, when a powerful nation misuses its power and forces others to capitulate, it is a consequence of a national ego. During the question and answer period, one student posed the

question, "How can we confront our national ego which suppresses women, ethnic minorities, and the poor?" The Roshi responded by saying, "Of course, first you have to examine your own ego, then find the likeminded people to work with you. This is hard work, but it must be done. I wish you luck."

When the terrorists attacked the Twin Towers in New York City on September 11, 2001, I was staying at Tofukuji. During my regular interview with the Roshi, I asked him how he felt about the terrorists. "Bad ego," he exclaimed. "I can say to the terrorists that you are 'bad.' You have bad 'ego' because your actions are full of hate and violence, and you are killing innocent people." I continued, "How should we deal with the terrorists?" He remarked, "The Zen way would be to show our compassion. Zen believes that the Buddha nature is in everyone, including the bad person." I mentioned that Mahatma Gandhi believed that even Hitler could have a change of heart, and that Gandhi sent a letter to Hitler to stop killing the Jews. "Zen would be close to the Gandhian approach," the Roshi remarked.

During the same conversation I asked him how lay people could control their egos. I mentioned to him that the monks had the luxury of time. They could do all forms of meditation and experience the state of ego-lessness. Lay people have so many responsibilities and very little time. The Zen master paused and said, "It is a matter of degree. Of course, the lay people cannot practice like the monks, but they can begin by reading books, listening to Zen lectures, and practicing meditation. A little bit of effort will produce results." He further explained, "If everyone took time to examine their egos and control their cravings, this world would be a better place." He began to narrate many instances in his life when he had changed the lives of people by teaching them the Zen way. While others had condemned these people, the Roshi accepted them and taught them to be compassionate. According to him, "Their lives

changed and they became better people." "Does Zen believe in counseling?" I asked. He responded by saying, "Well, there is no special Zen counseling. I only teach what Buddhism teaches. Within those teachings there are solutions to many problems."

So, what does Zen have to do with the weather? When I posed this question to the Roshi, he laughed and said, "Well, Zen will say: When it rains, take an umbrella. When there is too much sun, wear a hat. When it snows, put on your boots. Don't complain, because every day is a fine day." Failure to do so is to invite suffering.

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