

The Mountain is Green and the River is Flowing

BY MUKYONG JDPSN

An old man is sitting opposite me. He smells rather. The passengers next to me change their seats. I deliberately remain seated. The man drinks from a bottle of high proof liquor and offers me a sip. I decline politely. It is obvious: the man is lonely and is looking for contact. He begins to talk: I learn that he has no home, but once he had a profession and loved a woman. And in the city, somewhere, there are his kids, whom he has not seen in a very long time. Because then everything turned out differently... I listen to him, ask a question sometimes, expressing appreciation during the magic tricks that he clumsily tries to demonstrate using his hands and fingers. It used to be his hobby, he tells me. It is important that one has a hobby, he calls out to everyone who enters the S-Bahn. He wants to go to Schönefeld now, but it really doesn't matter. He then rides on together with me until my stop. Before I step off, we kindly say goodbye to each other. I realize that I admire him because of his unconcern. He is a man like all of us, with a history, with longings and plans, with laughter and sadness.

What is this: being human? We all say: "I". But do we understand this I? In nature, everything and anything has its job. The tiger, the snake, the flower... everyone understands his job. Only the human seems not to know why he came into this world. And so we search forever, for ourselves, for our destiny or fulfilment; for generally accepted rules and norms; for the reasons, possibilities and origins; and time and again for the meaning of living and of dying; for explanations, meaning and love - everyone in his own way. Some want to change the world. Others strive for amusements and consumption. Some of us settle for nice words or scientific theories. Some fall in love with the search and stay searchers. Others forget what provoked their search and what they wanted to search for. And still others don't want anything. If there were not the big attachments – sleep, food, money, fame and sex – that entangle us with life and that concern us all, with which asking and searching begin again... A wise man once said, "The mountain is the mountain and the river is the river." Undoubtedly true. It is a clear reflection of truth. But how does it occur? How does it function, and what does the experience of this truth mean in action?

Is it sufficient to say, "A watermelon is a watermelon"? If one wants to know what a watermelon is, then one has to take a knife, cut the melon up and eat a piece: "Ahhh lovely – so that is a watermelon".

Bite – listen – just doing what needs to be done! For this we need to arrive: at the You and ourselves in this precise moment. This can only succeed when nothing stands in between, no "good", no "bad", no preferences or aversions. Then the mountain is the mountain and the river the river. In the

moment, come back to oneself and recognize: everything is always complete. What could be missing? If this moment is clear, and the next one too, and then the next one again ... then our life becomes clear: the situation, our relationship to the situation and our function. Living and acting come into accord with reality. Inside and outside become one. Then the mountain is not only the mountain, and the river not only the river, but a clear reflection of truth in us becomes the experience of truth in us: the mountain is green and the river flows. And so, when we meet a person in need then we try to help. In Zen we call this Great Compassion or the Great Bodhisattva Way.

“With chest exposed he comes barefoot to the market. Covered in dirt and smeared with ash he broadly laughs all over his face. Without refuge in mystic powers, he brings sere trees quickly to bloom.” To be in the market with open hands, to do what needs to be done, means to help where help is needed. The Bodhisattva has jumped from the big No into the big Yes. He is not dwelling in the original unity of nothingness, which overcomes the multiplicity and contrariness, that makes up the nature of the Bodhisattva, but the essence of the experience of this connecting and uniting that lives between the separated and is possible, becomes alive in him. The world’s focal point is this One, which is nothing else than the other person, and therefore the entire world with all beings. “The mountain is green and the river flows” becomes the expression of great love, great compassion and the great Bodhisattva Way. It means being – being together – being for one another.

We find the reality of great compassion not only in the biographies of Buddha, Jesus, Gandhi or Mother Theresa and many others whose names cannot be mentioned here, but potentially in each and every one of us. We can create conditions that enable us to face the You fearlessly, open and emphatic: with open hands.

To set our potential free, we dedicate our Zen practice to the search, to the suffering and to the hope of all beings, and the always possible and everywhere immanent experience of the truth that everything, just as it is, is enough. Sentient beings are numberless, we vow to save them all. Delusions are endless, we vow to erase them all. The teachings are infinite, we vow to learn them all. The Buddha-Way is inconceivable, we vow to attain it. It is about retranslating the experience of truth that flashes up behind searching, letting go and coming back into life, where it has always been a daily reality: the mountain is green and the river flows.

One day, there was great disquiet in the monastery. The monks of the east wing were arguing with the monks of the west wing about a cat. “This is our cat!” “No, it is ours, after all we feed it every day!” It went back and forth like this, until Master Nan-chüan came between them. He took the cat and held it up. In his other hand he had a knife. He called out: “You monks! Give me one word and save this cat!” The monks could not answer and so he killed it. (*14th case of the Wu-Men-Kuan*)

How can you save the cat?

The Zen experience must combine with wisdom to manifest itself on the level of action. Then we can save the cat that Master Nan-chüan is holding up until the present day: “Give me one word!”

This article copyright © 2009 Kwan Um School of Zen