

BOUNDLESS WAY ZEN

Dharma talks, sermons
and teishos

EVERY DAY IS A GOOD DAY

A Sermon by James Ishmael Ford
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The Text

Yunmen introduced his subject by saying, "I do not ask you about the fifteenth of the month. Come; give me a phrase about after the fifteenth." And he himself responded, "Every day is a good day."

Not quite thirty-eight years ago I began practicing Zen meditation. For several years I lived as a Zen monk, much of that time resident in temple or monastery. Eventually I was ordained osho, a "full" priest, in the Soto tradition. In fact I continue to be credentialed as a Zen priest within the Soto Zen Buddhist Association in North America. As many here should know, I've also gone on to a western-style seminary and for fourteen years have served as a Unitarian Universalist minister, the last five here at the First Unitarian Society in Newton.

As with many dually credentialed clergy, and I'm one of many if at the more exotic end of that band; one affiliation tends to take the lead. This shouldn't include a denial of the other tradition, and it certainly doesn't for me. And, the lead can shift. For me that leading affiliation for just shy of the last decade and a half has been as a Unitarian Universalist cleric. I've loved the connections, including the difficulties and all the various challenges of blending these two traditions – Zen

Buddhism and Unitarian Universalism - into my life. I've found it a life that has been fulfilling and exciting. I believe I've had opportunities because of this dual affiliation that are unique, and definitely enriching.

Just as I've widened my horizons which began to be shaped by my monastic experience, through the opportunities presented by my life as a UU and UU minister, I've also faithfully continued my Zen practice. For just shy of twenty years now, I've been a student of koans, the unique spiritual discipline of the Zen way; a practice that uses bits of conversations, brief phrases, fragments of poetry and folk stories; just about anything that might make an authentic assertion about our lives and which can invite comment and expression drawn from our deepest human resources. To be a koan all the energy created in such an engagement then should be resolved within intimate encounter with a spiritual guide. For me this is the most important form of spiritual engagement I've ever encountered. I really believe koans to be the great treasure trove of world culture.

Over the last nearly two decades I've been given various responsibilities within the Zen communities I've belonged to, for the last half dozen years as a teacher of Zen meditation and as a spiritual director for those who wish to go deeper on this path. And now, just yesterday, among other things the sixtieth anniversary of the bombing of Hiroshima, I was given inka shomei.

Inka shomei is a Japanese phrase that roughly translates as "the legitimate seal of clearly furnished proof." Although I have to admit another teacher whom I greatly respect says the correct translation should be "show me the ink." In this ceremony I was acknowledged as an independent master of the koan way by my roshi, or senior teacher, John Tarrant. In a gathering of just under fifty people he presented me with several things, including a dramatic certificate of acknowledgement and a "teaching name." In the Harada/Yasutani line, the koan lineage to which we belong, a combination of the two great schools of Japanese Zen, Soto and Rinzai; the tradition is to give the new senior teacher, or roshi, a teaching name that includes the kanji, or character "cloud." So, I've joined that teaching community with the name Myoun which means "bright cloud." My full Zen name is Zeno Myoun which translates roughly as "Zen of the

ancient way, bright cloud."

Lineage, if not taken too literally, means a lot in the Zen community. John Tarrant is a poet and writer, considered by many to be one of the most artful of koan teachers in the west; as well as a wild man, with little interest in social niceties or conventions. Think of those stories of coyote and you get a bit of a picture of this particular teacher. And, of course, in this tradition he must be the heir to another teacher. John had been given inka by the renowned Robert Aitken, social justice activist, as well as the author of several of the central books on Zen practice available in the English language today. Through them I was joined to a line of teachers that extends back through Japan to China, and mythically at least, to Gautama Siddhartha, the Buddha of history.

This is a powerful and important step in my life. And the possible play of consequences is wide open. It can mean, among other things, that given the forbearance of loved ones and the communities I serve among; that an authentic line of Zen may take root as part of the Unitarian Universalist spiritual stream. Already my senior student is herself a UU, although thankfully, not a minister. Of course such speculation is attempting to peek into the mists and discern outlines that really are too vague to allow any bold assertions. The only thing that can be said with certainty is a multitude of possibilities have emerged and are now presenting them selves.

Today, rather than indulging in speculation about what might be, I want to go in a slightly different direction. It is conventional for someone who has been given inka to give a talk on a particular koan. Koan means "public case." Robert Aitken Roshi defines koan as "A presentation of the universal and the particular; a theme of (Zen meditation) to be made clear."

The particular koan that is traditionally addressed at this special time comes from a twelfth century Chinese anthology called the *Biyān Lu*, in Japanese the *Hekiganroku* and in English, the *Blue Cliff Record*; case six, usually called "Every Day is a Good Day." In a tradition not known for indulging positive thinking, in fact a tradition that tends to rub

our noses in what actually presents, however difficult or unpleasant it might be; this is something of a difficult text.

It occurred to me that Unitarian Universalists are also people who try to see things as they really are, to wrestle with big questions and small, and out of that to lead lives of integrity. So, rather than wait for a suitable time to give that talk in a Zen context, I'd like to give that formal talk on Yunmen's assertion here, today, among my Unitarian Universalist family. I hope that's okay with you. It could be helpful.

The text of the case is pretty simple. "Yunmen introduced his subject by saying, 'I do not ask you about the fifteenth of the month. Come; give me a phrase about after the fifteenth.' And then he himself responded, 'Every day is a good day.'"

This isn't quite as esoteric as it might at first sound. In the ancient Chinese calendar the fifteen of the month is the time of the full moon. And the full moon is one of the ancient symbols for awakening. So, the question Yunmen is asking may also be phrased, "I don't ask about before your awakening, but rather I want you to speak out of your awakening." Obviously there's still some unpacking to do. Let's start with context.

Yunmen Wenyan was one of the greats of China's Zen masters, living from the middle of the ninth century into the middle of the tenth. This was the time when the Tang dynasty collapsed into what is called the period of the Five Dynasties and the Ten States – a period of nearly continuous warfare and horrific social upheaval. Yunmen towered above this terrible time, a beacon of light within the darkness. An amazing figure, he occurs throughout the literature of Zen, appearing dozens of times in the great classic collections of anecdotes and sayings of the masters.

In our time Andy Ferguson has compiled his own magnificent collection of the sayings and doings of the first generations of Zen masters in a book *Zen's Chinese Heritage*. There he records the story of Yunmen's awakening, which I find directly relevant to any investigation of the assertion "Every day is a good day." After years of diligent study under a variety of teachers Yunmen went to see the master Muzhou Daoming. Muzhou was famously cranky, and would often

shut the door of his hut as soon as he heard someone approach down the path. And, indeed, as Yunmen came to his hut, Muzhou closed his door. "Yunmen knocked on the door.

"Muzhou said, 'Who is it?'

"Yunmen said, 'It's me.'

"Muzhou said, 'What do you want?'

"Yunmen said, 'I'm not clear about my life. I'd like the master to give me some instruction.'

"Muzhou then opened the door and, taking a look at Yunmen, closed it again. Yunmen knocked on the door in this manner three days in a row. On the third day when Muzhou opened the door, Yunmen stuck his foot in the doorway. Muzhou grabbed Yunmen and yelled, 'Speak! Speak!' When Yunmen began to speak, Muzhou gave him a shove and said, 'Too late!'

Muzhou then slammed the door, catching and breaking Yunmen's foot. At that moment, Yunmen experienced enlightenment."

He carried the mark of his enlightenment, his awakening with a foot that never quite healed. Frankly, I myself much prefer a certificate. The question, however, is, was what Yunmen experienced worth the years of struggle, the burning pain of that encounter, and the lifetime limp that followed? What was it that led him to assert out of his awakening what might seem to be yes to that question, every day is a good day?

I suggest his point isn't prosaic; it's more complicated than just saying yes to what is. In fact he's taking us to a place we cannot go while clinging to ideas of high or low, good or ill. What is being pointed to all turns on the Zen teaching of awakening. So, let's hold that up for a moment. One Japanese word for the instant of awakening is *kensho*, which literally means "seeing into (one's) nature." Another word for this is *satori*, which derives from a verb meaning "to know." Here we're addressing a particular kind of religious or spiritual experience... not, I need to underscore, and

spiritual experience – not, I need to underscore and underscore again, not a philosophical assertion. And definitely this is not raising denial to some kind of spiritual plus. Yunmen points to an accessible insight into what it is we can know and how we can know it.

Now, we're gathered here as a community of Unitarian Universalists – folk who tend to believe in salvation by bibliography. At the very least we have among us an inclination to seek understanding through definition. I can briefly indulge that inclination, if you are willing to take it more as a pointing than a flat statement. Everything here is about living, about breathing, about being.

Zen asserts reality as we can perceive it is two things simultaneously. On the one side is what I'd call the world of history, the world of things emergent. This is what we commonly sense and understand. I am here. You are there. Each and every thing exists in its own trajectory and you and I are definitely not the same. However. At the same time. Simultaneously. In an offense to Aristotle and, perhaps, to common sense, Zen asserts you and I and all the cosmos, every precious bit within that realm of history, of things emergent, share something in common.

From this angle on reality, you might say we all, you and I, have no bottom. We appear in the world, quite real, but without any ground. Turns out we are not complete and autonomous; rather we bleed out into the universe, into openness. Or, perhaps it's better to say we arise out of, are sustained by, and return to that openness, that boundless. A traditional Zen word for this aspect of what we are is "empty." Don't cling to this too tightly, but it might help to think of this in the context of contemporary Unitarian Universalism's assertion within the Principles and Purposes of that "interdependent web of which we all are a part."

But, here, now, let's take another way in. You might think of this empty as the family name. You and I and the pulpit and flies and heat and cold – those are our personal names. But we also all belong to the great Empty family.

In one Zen text, Hakuin's *Song of Zazen*, we are told our wandering cut off from our true heritage, from our Empty family is like "a child of a wealthy home wandering among

family is like a child of a wealthy home wandering among the poor." This is important. What we're addressing isn't a philosophical assertion. It is a spiritual assertion. It's about, when all is said and done, who and what we are. It's about our true heritage. And, happily, within the Zen way, and how it is with all koans, this assertion comes with an invitation.

You and I can know this truth for ourselves, just like when we take a drink of water we know intimately and immediately whether it is cool or warm. So with the assertion we are one even as we are many; we can know this in some way that helps, genuinely helps. And, Yunmen suggests, holds, up, in fact asserts boldly, there is something of joy and peace and possibility in this knowing. Although I have to admit, it isn't exactly a knowing. Knowing, after all, belongs to a dualism: knowing and not knowing. And, we're going somewhere else.

I believe we can approach the conundrum and get a pointing to that somewhere else, through a look at a good day. It is a looking that doesn't take away from the mess of life. This is not an assertion that the nearly two hundred thousand lives lost directly and indirectly in the bombing of Hiroshima didn't happen, and wasn't horrible. Nor is it an assertion about the likelihood that an allied invasion of the home islands could have led to even more deaths. Nor is it an assertion about the wars and terrors that are going on today. Well, not exactly.

Yunmen, lame and living in the midst of war and famine, asks his community to address that time after awakening. And from that place he answers on our behalf that "every day is a good day." Two points flow at this moment. One is practical, if for our purposes today, secondary. If we discover our true family name, not as a good idea, but as a deepest truth about ourselves; then I suggest, our actions in the world of personal names will become a little more skilful. Knowing Hitler is part of the family doesn't mean he mustn't be opposed. But it can affect when, how and where we intervene.

However; first things first. Here, now, I want to go to the first point. Why wander among the poor? Why think you're separate, alone, isolated? I, mean, why think that if it isn't true? How can you find out, for yourself, like taking that drink of water; how do you find out for yourself that you are vastly

greater than your imagining? How do you get there?


Well, there is actually right here. We find it, you and I, as we learn to open our hands rather than to hold too tightly, crushing the life out of things. We learn as we sit down, shut up, and pay attention. Or, in the words of my friend, the Zen teacher Diane Rizzetto: stop, attend, listen. It's that easy. No more difficult than falling off a log. Just for a moment, let go of your ideas about what is and let what is be. Forget Zen Buddhist. Forget Unitarian Universalist. Forget like. Forget dislike. Forget, just for a second, just for a single beat of the heart.


My goodness, at that moment, perhaps your heart will break, your inner war will declare an armistice, and with Yunmen and all the ancestors, your mouth will open and you will sing the truth of the heavens and the earth. It is the amazing grace that fills the world, and births hope in every moment.

Every day is a good day.

And then if that's true, if it turns out to be so, then how can we say anything other than

Amen.

 Close

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