

YUNMEN'S BRIGHT LIGHT

ROSS BOLLETER

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Yunmen gave instruction saying, "Everyone has their own light. If you want to see it you can't. The darkness is dark, dark. Now what is your light?"

He himself answered, "The storeroom. The gate." Again he said, "It would be better to have nothing than to have something good."

Although Yunmen was a student of Hsueh Feng he was in fact enlightened by the ancient and eccentric teacher Mu-Chou (Chen Tsun-Su). It is said that Mu-Chou lived alone in a hut near the high road travelled by monks when they were going on pilgrimage from monastery to monastery. Mu-Chou would make grass sandals and leave them on the side of the road so that monks could replace their old worn out footwear. Mu-Chou was most secretive about this and it took years to find out who was responsible for the generous actions.

Mu-Chou's teaching methods were extremely rough, utterly abrupt. It is said that he would listen to the sound of the footsteps of approaching monks and if they didn't indicate the Way he would refuse to open his door. Yunmen came to him twice and Mu-Chou refused to open the door; the third time, Yunmen succeeded in getting his foot in. Mu-Chou grabbed him and urged him, "Speak! Speak!" As Yunmen was about to say something, Mu-Chou threw him out, slammed the door on him, breaking one of his legs. The intense pain awakened Yunmen instantly.

Yunmen went on to become a great teacher with over sixty enlightened disciples, unwittingly becoming the founder of the Yunmen School which lasted into the thirteenth century in China until it was absorbed into the Linchi (Rinzai) School. The Yunmen school was responsible for the creation and preservation of some of the great masterpieces of Ch'an literature in this period, including the book of one hundred koans entitled The Blue Cliff Record. From which this case is taken. Apart from Yunmen's Bright Light, there are thirteen other koans which have Yunmen as their protagonist in The Blue Cliff Record.

Yunmen's style is splendidly incisive and he became celebrated for his one word responses, which became known as "The One Word Barrier".

A monk asked, "What is the straight path to Yunmen Mountain?"
Yunmen replied, "Chi'in!" (intimacy) (1)

A monk asked Yunmen, "What are the words that transcend the Buddha and the Patriarchs?"
Yunmen said, "Kobyō!" (sesame rice cake) (2)

A monk asked Yunmen, "What is Buddha?"
Yunmen said, "Kanshiketsu!" (dried shitstick) (3)

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With "Ch'in!", "Kobyō!", "Kanshiketsu", Yunmen vividly reveals the Great Way. He uses words in a way utterly unclouded with notions and concepts of meaning or no-meaning. The One Word Barrier, while powerful and penetrating, is never merely rough, and the spirit of his way is lofty yet accommodating; uncompromising, yet utterly generous.

Yunmen said to the assembly, "Within heaven and earth, in the midst of the cosmos, there is one treasure hidden in the body. Holding a lantern it goes towards the Buddha hall. It brings the great triple gate and puts it on the lantern." (4)

A monk asked, "What is the roar of the earthen ox on top of the snow ridge?" Yunmen replied, "Heaven and earth darkened red." (5)

There is weird splendour in these koans which show the unclouded depths of Yunmen's vision as poet and Zen teacher. Yuan Wu in his comment on "Yunmen's One Treasure" in The Blue Cliff Record says of Yunmen, "by means of unconditional compassion he acts unasked as an excellent friend!" (6)

Yunmen said that if we want to see our light, we can't. When we turn inward to see the source of our being, to discover the light of self-nature, everything is dark and there is nothing to be seen. Searching inwardly for our true self is like the eye trying to look at itself, like the sun trying to shine on the sun.

In this condition the darkness is dark, dark. If we look at this from one angle, this seems to be the darkness of a dead end where our whole enterprise seems to have foundered in despair and delusion. Yet this condition, no less than opening fresh eyes to the Morning Star, or sighting distant peach blossoms, is the Way itself, conveying our essential nature. When the practice feels dry and fruitless and we seem to scoop from the same empty waterhole, when "the tree withers and the leaves fall", (7) we find everything right there.

If we continue to practise and to carry the koan in the place where "the darkness is dark, dark," then inside and outside become one; there is no gap between self and other and there is nowhere to search. This is a familiar place in practice and is referred to over and over again in Zen literature. Here is Bassui Zenji, a 14th century Japanese Rinzai teacher, whose natural koan was "Who is (the Master of) hearing that sound?", showing how to work with this condition:

At last every vestige of self-awareness will disappear and you will feel like a cloudless sky. Within yourself you will find no "I", nor will you discover anyone who hears. This Mind is like the void, yet it hasn't a single spot that can be called empty. Do not mistake this state for self-realisation, but continue to ask yourself even more intensely, "Now who is it that hears?" If you bore and bore into this question, oblivious to anything else, even this feeling of voidness will vanish and you won't be aware of anything – total darkness will prevail. (Don't stop here, but) keep asking with all your strength, "What is it that hears?" Only when you have completely exhausted the questioning will the question burst; now you will feel like a person that has come back from the dead. This is true realisation. You will see the Buddhas of all the Universes face to face and the Patriarchs past and present. (8)

Even when our resources are utterly depleted we don't give up but steadily return to the koan using all the energy we have at that time, but not straining, not forcing. For Bassui it was "Who is it who hears?", for us it is most likely to be Mu, but the procedure is the same, the same light, steady, unfaltering vigilance.

The vigil of working with the koan and the koan working with us prepares the ground, and in the most fundamental sense, is the ground of realisation. In that deepened condition, unknowingly we ready ourselves and any spark can light up the cave. For Yunmen it was the pain of his leg being broken by the door as Mu-Chou slammed it; for Wu-men it was the sound of the drum announcing the noonday meal; for Ling-Yun, after thirty years of practice, it was the sight of the pink blossoms of distant peach trees; for Kyogen it was the sound of the stone striking the bamboo – "duk".

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"The storeroom. The gate." For Yunmen these are our lights and when we are ready and utterly open they shine with our true nature. Not only the storehouse, the gate, but the star and the wattle, the drunk enveloping us with his beery breath at the party, the shit in the toilet; all these are our own lights. And not only the sharp and crystalline calls of the world, but also the boring, the infuriating and the painful voices that arise in our zazen; all the states and conditions which generate and compose our emotional weather; all the homeless and rejected parts of the self that cry out and long to take us in and be taken in, to give and receive refuge. These too, with the storehouse, the gate, our own own lights.

However, if we search for our true nature in the world of colour and form we can't find it. Searching for the flower, the star, the storeroom, the gate that will be the agent of our enlightenment is as futile as the inward introspective search for our own light. If we try to turn towards it, we deviate. Seen one way, our trying cannot discover or confirm our own bright light; from the other side the searching and striving is itself the whole matter. This is conveyed in a telling and lovely way in the first of Tosotsu's Three Barriers:

The purpose of going to abandoned, grassy places and doing zazen is to search for my self-nature. Now, at such a time, where is my self nature?" (9)

The lonely figure that searches in the undergrowth provides its light no less than the storeroom, the gate.

"It would be better to have nothing than to have something good. In saying this, Yunmen warns us against clinging to enlightenment and getting caught up with attainment; better, he says, to live without a trace of have and have not, then the planes roar through, the birdsong penetrates everywhere, we laugh and cry, get up, forget to get up, make love, put on clothes, go to the beach, get born, die; all this without the impediments of ownership. However, unfortunately, there is no trouble in recognising whose telephone bill it is when it lands on the hall table!

Again, in saying, "It would be better to have nothing than to have something good", Yunmen warns us not to go on clinging to his words. There are grave dangers in utilising "The storeroom, the gate" or "dried shitstick, or "sesame rice cake" as mechanical koan responses that neither illuminate the Way or succeed in propping up the gate. Better to show the whole empty universe in our silence than to formally reiterate his words. One moment their flash illuminates the whole world, the next we drag them around like carcasses. Even worse, they get handed onto others. Once is enough. Enough is enough. Yunmen refused to allow his listeners to take notes during his talks. "What is the use of recording my words and tying up your tongues?" he is said to have cried as he chased away those who wanted to memorise his sayings. It is thanks to Hsian-lin Ch'eng-Yuan who dressed himself in a paper robe and wrote down Yunmen's sayings and dialogues on it, that we have the substantial collection of koans and stories that nourish Zen practice in our times. (10)

In the flickering, unsteady darkness of the practice we come up to the gate a thousand times and judder at the final step. Likewise the Universe itself presents the whole matter over and over again till ordinary things gleam with the allure of our self-nature.

As practice deepens we just accept the fear and hesitation as we come up to the gate but don't go through; on each occasion we just resume our vigil with the koan. In time, the "inner" world of yearning and striving and the "outer" world of 'the storeroom and the gate" fall into deeper and deeper affinity. Unaided, the Way is seeking the Way.

Yunmen speaks of us wanting to see our own light: Rilke, the great German poet of the early twentieth century whose later work (especially the Ninth Duino Elegy) inhabits a realm which has a considerable overlap with Zen, leans on the other side when he writes of the yearning of things for us to notice and include them:

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Yes, the springtimes needed you. Often a star was waiting for you to notice it. A wave rolled towards you out of the distant past, or as you walked under an open window, a violin yielded itself to your hearing(11).

This is the fleeting world that needs us and in some strange way keeps calling to us, as Rilke puts it, the most fleeting of all. (12) As we yearn and search, so too do the star, the wave, the violin. The fleeting world shines out moment by moment as the fallen jacaranda blossoms staring up from the back lawn, the cark cark of the crows, the son or daughter arguing back, challenging our authority – each calls out to be included.

We find this calling, this beckoning in our tradition when in the first Oxherding picture, the herdsman is fruitlessly searching for the Ox (which in the series of ten pictures depicting particular stages on the Way, stands for the Mind of Realisation). It is evening and the herdsman is exhausted and unable to find any trace of the Ox, hearing only the cicadas in the trees.

The cicadas chirp chirp with all their might; the Ox is right there, but the herdsman is not ready for this and the journey and the search for refuge continue. Yet the cicadas continue to call and, moment after moment, each thing longs to be included; the cat comes up to the back door for its evening meal, someone turns on a radio next door. Events scuffle, jostle to be taken in. "Here I am!" they shout.

Dogen saw this clearly when he wrote: "The Dharma wheel turns from the beginning. There is neither surplus nor lack. The whole universe is moistened with nectar, and the truth is ready to harvest." (13)

When we accept the invitation, the self and the Universe find refuge when there is no self, no other. In this realm, all beings are saved, as they have been from the beginning. When Shakyamuni having sat all night under the Bodhi tree looked up and saw the Morning Star with fresh eyes, the Morning Star, no less than Shakyamuni, found its true home: each was the other's own bright light.

Yunmen put it this way: "Medicine and sickness mutually correspond to each other. The whole universe is medicine. What is the self?" In asking what is the self, Yunmen is asking a similar question to "What is our own light?"

The night is full of cicadas; the fan hums loudly, shivering stars cover the sky at midnight; we sit nodding off, turning back over and over again to the koan. Depth calls to depth. Each person, each being, each thing longs to be included.

At such a time, what is our own light?

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