

The Elusive Koan: What is “this”?

You could say my zen journey began long before I actually became involved in zen practice. I grew up in a family with parents who were young adults in the Second World War. They met each other and married but were never happy together. My father drank, and only recently I learned my mother suffered from childhood trauma. While in many ways my childhood was a happy one, it was also marked by my parents’ unhappiness, and the arguments and fights that were commonplace. I was also physically abused by a neighbour (the grandmother of my early childhood friend), and this left me anxious and unsure of myself.

As a teenager, I started to wonder about things and concluded, in that arrogant way that teenagers do, that my parents didn’t know how to be happy (arrogant in the sense that I had no idea what they had been through and what their struggles were). I remember actually thinking this through slowly and concluding that I had to find a way to live that was conducive to happiness. This was the years of the late 60s and early 70s, and alternative lifestyles and things Eastern were in the air. Among others, I read Alan Watts’ book *The Way of Zen* – I still have my battered copy – and I fell in love with the vision I extracted from the book. I thought, this is a way to live. I was enthralled with the romantic vision of a zen life.

At the end of the book, Watts concludes with these words: “when there is neither past nor future, and no one to whom this moment is present, what is it? When Fa-ch’ang was dying, a squirrel screeched on the roof. ‘It’s just this’ he said, ‘and nothing else.’” I thought that this was marvellous, it sounded profound, but it left me perplexed. I wondered, what is this “this” that Fa-ch’ang was referring to? I thought, he can’t mean this life as it is that I find so unacceptable. So I went looking for a way out.

In the mid-70s, there being no zen centre in town, I started to go to meditation meetings taught by a couple of Englishmen who were monastics in the Thai Buddhist tradition. There I learnt mindfulness of breathing, *metta* meditation and, at one retreat, a visualization in which one would dismantle the body, skin first, then flesh muscle by muscle, then skeleton, bone by bone, and at each point ask oneself where is the self in this. Looking back, I can see how I did not appreciate what was on offer. These men were deep practitioners, who had spent some years living and practising in the Thai forest, but all I wanted to talk about was zen. I remember one of them saying to me, in understandable mild frustration, if you go to the Thai forest you will find all the zen you need there!

After a year or so of practice, I moved into the temple and became an attendant serving the monks. During the rains retreat I went with the monk I regard as my first real teacher to live for three months and engage in intensive practice in the countryside. My teacher, who was Thai, was in his sixties at the time, a forest monk who had spent a decade living in retreat on a mountain. His manner of practice conveyed a joy and happiness that was alluring, and I regard the months practising with him as a very precious time. He had studied the *Tao Te Ching* as a young man and, along with the traditional Theravada teachings, he taught the way of what he called in his limited English “no-doing-with”. This was his rendition in English of the Taoist concept of *wei wu wei* – the doing of no-doing, or effortless action.

Over the rains retreat, there was no schedule and no times for beginning and ending meditation. Our teacher would often sit on his own for several hours, and at times through the night, without moving. With myself and the two others who were taking care of him, we

would all sit together each day for variable lengths of time up to about 90 minutes. For the first month, I found several meditations a day like this to be gruelling and I was wracked with tension and would often shake it off while we sat. However, after a month or so this settled down and I found, with guidance and encouragement, I could sit peacefully. While we sat, our teacher would now and then make a remark. If a bird called, he would say something like, “sound only, no bird; no doing with the sound”.

During those months I learned some valuable lessons. I learned the virtue of sitting through all the tension and resistance that comes up; that if one sits through, then all the effort and struggle eventually falls away, and the practice becomes effortless. I also learned that a shift might come unbidden in a moment of grace. Living there in the country for those 3 months in 1976, for the first time in my life I felt at peace and open to the marvels of the world. I experienced the joy and happiness of a meditative way of life.

After leaving the retreat, I went off to university and for those few years afterwards, I continued to be at peace with things, even though I did not meditate so much anymore. As a student without much money, I would often sit throughout the day, on the veranda, outside the house I shared with others, just enjoying being with the passers-by, the trees in the front yard, and the changing panorama of the sky. My question, what did Fa-ch’ang mean by “just this?” had faded into the background but, to some extent, I was living it without being consciously aware that this was so.

At the end of my second year of university, I had the misfortune to be run down in the street by an out-of-control truck. I was knocked unconscious and suffered fractures to my spine and pelvis. My left knee was also dislocated, which resulted in my left foot being rotated outwards by forty-five degrees and stuck there for several hours. When I woke up at the back of the truck, I had no idea what had happened. I was so damaged, it then occurred to me that I was going to die now. I remember thinking, “Oh, is this it?” I had a sudden vision of how anxious I had been in my life, worrying about all sorts of silly things, such as my arms being too thin, how my voice sounded etc., and this all seemed trivial in the face of death. I then had the thought, “but I have never been to Italy,” with Italy standing in for all the things I would never do. And then I had a deep realization that one’s life is only ever what it is, and that such thoughts seemed ridiculous in the face of this truth. I then settled into a beatific state and was ready to die peacefully. As is obvious in that I am writing this, I didn’t die and had to endure two months in pain in hospital and a long rehabilitation afterwards. I vowed to myself that I wouldn’t harbour the anxieties I had in the past, or forget what I had realised about life, but over time my anxieties snuck back in, and the sense of my realisation receded. All of this happened at the end of 1979 and through 1980.

I began to sit again regularly by myself, although now this was challenging due to my injuries. The question resurfaced in my mind again, what does it mean that it is “just this?” I had a sense of it from my practice with my Thai teacher and from the experience during my accident, but it still seemed ungraspable. I would raise the question in my mind while I was walking in the street and I would look around, but I felt something eluded me. In the mid-1980s I went travelling and ended up living in Japan and it was there that I finally took up a regular zen practice in Tokyo. I was introduced to *shikan taza* at the Soto zazenkai I regularly attended, and this fitted very nicely with the kind of meditation I had learned from my Thai teacher. I continued to absorb into the breath and then, when I was settled, to just sit.

Returning home after two years in Japan, I started to sit at a zen centre in my home town. Following a breakdown in my primary relationship, which opened a time of great difficulty for me, I started to regularly attend sesshin and this has continued since then. As a way of dealing with my suffering, I returned to the practice my Thai teacher had taught me, and began again to enter very deep meditation states, and this helped restore me. I remember getting up early and sitting 90 minutes of zazen each day before work, trying to recreate the experience of the rains retreat. However, a few years later in the year 2000, my mother died and, as well as the loss of my mother, I learned the lesson of impermanence in relation to states of mind produced by meditation. My mother's death triggered a complete loss of these deep states of meditation and I went into a difficult period of grief. The sense of luminosity I had been experiencing and the joy and the happiness evaporated overnight. I had grief for my mother but also grief for the loss of the states I had been experiencing in zazen

After my mother's death, I was drawn to koan practice, and I began a long period of attending sesshin and meditating with koans and over many years I worked through the koan curriculum of the tradition I was in. Taking up koan practice completely transformed my practice in a way that was surprising to me. I remember hearing one of my teacher's remark in a conversation, that the shadow side of just sitting practice is that you can be sitting outside the house and not even know it. This resonated with me. The koans reactivated my wondering heart and over the years I was brought back again and again to Fa-ch'ang's, "it's just this."

There is so much that has been of value for me in koan practice. It mobilized and focussed the spiritual search in a way that has born many fruits. It helped to start to free me from the prison of my own small mind and the way it constructs things. Now I can see how it connects back to my Thai teacher's teachings of "no bird, just the sound." Laying down the doing, the constructing, is his "no doing with". So koan practice introduced me to the fecundity of not knowing. How true intimacy with all things is entered through the laying down of my knowing. Koan practice also allowed me to discover the manner of being of a child at play again, where spontaneity (another way to translate *wei-wu-wei* – no doing) can be freed from the inhibitions of the serious adult. Fritz Perls, the founder of gestalt therapy, once wrote that most adults actualize an infantile conception of what an adult is. That is, they act out what a serious adult looks like to the eye of a child and in doing so lose the freedom of being a playful child. Koan study, I learned, has the capacity to free us in this way too. I have also come to understand that the zen path of the koan provides, at another level, an experiential learning program. Rather than learn from lectures or sutras about death, impermanence, emptiness and so on, the koan way opens up a path of personal inquiry, by asking us to look and see what this is for ourselves. This has the virtue of avoiding getting stuck in concepts. We learn to express in a way that bypasses verbal explanation and, when it works well, it helps us to really see the fact that might be occluded by the names. Being a sometime poet, one year at sesshin in the country I composed my own expression of all of this:

Starlit darkness
in the forgotten valley
the night creatures
chant the secret everlasting sutra
no names will ever hinder
the unfolding of this perfect song.

However, somewhat to my surprise, despite having many insight experiences, it was after some years of koan practice, and not at the beginning, that a doubt arose in me. I began to

feel that, despite my many experiences, I wasn't really getting something, and this grew into a deep puzzlement. I remember thinking to myself, in the end, what is this *really* about? The old question of "what is this?" returned.

My doubt grew and became overwhelming, almost intolerable to sit with. At this time, I had been listening to Jeff Shore's talks, and I had the intuition that maybe I should go and practice with him. This went on for about five years. A good dharma friend responded when I shared this by simply asking, well, when are you going? This opened a door for me and so I travelled to Kyoto and began to practice with Jeff. This has proved very important in my journey. Not knowing me, Jeff challenged me in a fresh way, and I was able to be open with him in a way that was unencumbered by the past, how many years I had practised, and so on. Jeff asked me, what is lacking? This question focused me in a way that gathered all my yearning and seeking into it. One day, stepping through the door of the supermarket in Kyoto, I stopped both physically and mentally there in the street. Although no words were there at the time, Fa-ch'ang's "it is just this and nothing else" would work well enough, now that I reflect on it. I walked back to the hermitage in a stunned state. Eventually the words arose, "there has been nothing lacking from the beginning."

One hears many criticisms of koan practice, and I think this form of practice has its shadow side. It can become a distraction from the heart's true searching. As Jeff Shore remarked to me one time, people are often moved through the early koan on the basis of a partial insight and are expected to "fall" at some point later in the koan process. In a way, this is what happened for me but I needed to keep faith with my searching heart and follow my hunches, which led me to seek out Jeff and see what might happen. The lesson I have learned, perhaps, is that we should take responsibility as zen practitioners for our journeys, and we should be ruthlessly honest with ourselves. Teachers, or good dharma friends, which might be a preferable name for such people, can tell us when we are stuck, they can encourage us, inspire us, tell us not to stop yet, tell us when we are deceiving ourselves and so on. But they cannot sit for us, they cannot do the work of being honest with ourselves, they cannot enter the darkness of not knowing for us, so that we might see what is blindingly obvious but occluded by all our knowing. In discussing my path with Jeff Shore, he remarked: "You are humbly and acutely aware that it is not so much the fault of the 'curriculum' as it is your own failure." I think this is so important, for we can get lost externalising the blame, blaming the path or the teachers or whatever, when we need to take responsibility for walking the path ourselves.

I also, from my experience, have a sense of the shadow side of breath practice and just sitting. If one sits enough, and develops skill as a meditator, one can enter deep states of samadhi and maintain a sense of serenity, joy, and happiness, and this can be quite nourishing, but it can also be a trap. The heart's deep wondering is quelled but not resolved and, as I have learned a couple of times in my life, something may then come along and teach the lesson of impermanence and suffering once again – a traffic accident, an illness, the loss of someone we love. At such times, it becomes clear that these states are dependent on causes and conditions and also subject to change and, as such, they do not offer the lasting peace that they seem to be offering when immersed in them. This is not to undermine in any way the importance of serenity as one of the wings of practice. Nearly twenty years ago, one of my zen teachers warned me that I was like a person sitting by a river absorbed in a bucket of fascinating water. I cheekily responded that it is a pretty nice bucket of water. It has taken me a long time to learn that I was addicted in a way to that bucket of water as a solution. It worked at times, but it kept me stuck in clinging and attachment and held me back.

So, after 45 years or so, I have a sense of what Fa-ch'ang's brief sermon, as he died, was pointing to. But the self-cherishing ego is recalcitrant, and I continue to sit through the seemingly endless resistances. Perhaps, what I have learned in the process is that the true koan is what originally animates the spiritual search in us - whatever it was that made me wonder how one might live a life conducive to happiness, and to set out and look for it. I have also learned the usefulness of what is sometimes found in a book, when an old koan connects to the heart's core, and offers a provisional form for the seeking heart to orient itself to. In this way, the old koans may serve a purpose, as one of them did for me, but they may not. The koan, as is often stressed, has to be a living koan, one that resonates to the depths with our wondering hearts. Otherwise koans can devolve into a list that one ticks off. Ticking of the list might teach you a lot about the history of zen, and you may learn to play like a child again, but the true mystery might remain opaque. My own view, for what it is worth, is that both practitioner and "teacher" have a responsibility to find a way together to keep the practice alive or to bring it alive by keeping faith with our heart's true question. Reflecting on my own experience, I now ask myself why I couldn't speak openly about not feeling like I was getting it. I think I felt a sense of shame that having come this far, I didn't really get it. I somehow knew at some level that there is nothing wrong with the curriculum and that in a sense "the failure" was mine. What I didn't know then, was that acknowledging that sense of "not getting it", as painful as it was, was important in helping me to find a way forward, one that I am very glad I found.

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