

from "The Book of Householder Koans: Waking Up in the Land of Attachments" by Eve Myonen Marko & Wendy Egyoku Nakao

Dantika's Dream

Gott, Gut, Gutt, Good, God.
What's in a name?
What will you do when words fail you
And no sound comes?

KOAN

Dantika had a dream:

On the first morning of retreat, she is told to sit on the zendo monitor's cushion. To her surprise, she finds two bells—one the usual zendo monitor's bell, a second smaller one—and only one striker. She rings the usual bell three times to begin the first meditation period, but she hears no sound. She tries again, then decides to ring the smaller bell. No sound comes out of that bell, either. Feeling rushed and frustrated, she hits the bell with such force that the striker breaks.

She shows the broken striker to the senior student next to her, asking for direction. Gutt says, "Just begin."

REFLECTION

Who or what is Gutt? Is it the senior student? Does it refer to God, which is Gott in German? Or is it Dantika's gut?

The zendo monitor's practice is to prepare the zendo for meditation and to signal the beginning and end of sitting periods by hitting the bell. In meditation centers we train people to take care of the meditation space. They come in early, put on the heat, set up the cushions, and when everyone is seated they hit the bell. Only this time no sound came.

Dantika tries a second time, and still there is no sound. So she hits the bell with such force that the striker breaks.

Can we relate to such a situation? We do our best and abide by the rules, and things don't turn out. We get fired from our job, our marriage ends, our children grow up differently from what we expected. Over and over, life takes a path that unsettles us. Craters appear in the asphalt of the road, accidents, detours, construction, destruction, even complete closures, and still we're surprised. It's not supposed to be this way! As soon as we deal with one thing, something new turns up: a bell that doesn't ring, a striker that breaks, a car that won't start, a leak in the roof.

Every one of these events is an opportunity to experience the vitality and unpredictability of this moment. We meditate regularly to realize this, sometimes depending too much on quiet and a lack of disruption. It's often the "mishaps" that wake us out of the stupor we call routine. Do we see it as an invitation to have an adventure, try a new approach, do something new, or do we get frustrated and self-conscious about making mistakes?

When the latter happens, you could look to your teacher or a senior student for instruction. You could also listen to "Gutt," or gut, when it tells you to just begin.

How do you begin when the bell doesn't ring? Make it up. Get creative. Sing aloud the ringing of the bell. Clap your hands or hit the floor three times. Just begin.

One day, Yen Kuan called to his attendant, "Bring me my rhinoceros-horn fan."

The attendant said, "The fan is broken."

Yen Kuan said, "If the fan is broken, bring the rhinoceros back to me."

Every moment demands of us to present our mind, spontaneous, dynamic, untethered to patterns of the past. Can we improvise, think out of the box? Come up with a new sound or a new food dish? Come up with a rhinoceros?

"It Don't Mean a Thing (If It Ain't Got That Swing)," wrote Duke Ellington. Doesn't every situation call for its own "swing," its own freshness of response? The broken fan, the bell that won't ring, the broken striker—this is us. We're all in this together. There are days when we are broken, when we can't ring, when we don't say and do what is usual and expected. For some of us, those are the days we can't get out of bed. For others, those are the days when we fly.

Since we're shattered anyway, why not start from scratch? Why not try out a new song, go to work by a different road, get down and dirty in the sandbox with your little child, or get into a long conversation with a street person you've seen many times and always ignored?

"The rhinoceros-horn fan has long been in use," says the verse on the koan. "In summer, cool, in winter, warm. Everyone has it, why don't they know?" There is a fan to cool us in summer and warm us in winter, we all have it. That same fan can provide cool air when it's warm and it can also circulate heat when it's cold. So, tell me, how do you fan yourself? What does Gutt say?

In what situations do you feel self-conscious and afraid of making mistakes? What's the worst that can happen? If the worst happens, what will you do?"