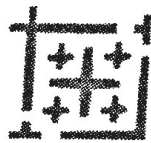


Rhinoceros



One day, Yanguan called to his assistant, "Bring me the rhinoceros fan."

The assistant said, "It is broken."

Yanguan said, "In that case, bring me the rhinoceros."

Rhinoceros

The Zen teacher Yanguan had an assistant who had walked in from the desert following the Silk Road. When he reached China, he took off his shoes and black sand fell out of them. At Yanguan's place he was given the job of making tea, taking messages, and waiting around until he was needed.

People came to Yanguan because they suffered and didn't know what else to do. The assistant was usually present when the teacher had public conversations, and he noticed that Yanguan had a knack of listening without putting distance between himself and the visitors. Soon the assistant, who had thought of himself merely as a witness, found himself being pulled into the stories he heard. He began to feel off balance a lot of the time. He felt even more off balance because with Yanguan he never knew whether he was in an ordinary conversation or not.

"All our conversations are ordinary," said Yanguan.

"Then why is it so hard for me to stay on my feet?" the assistant asked.

"No need to stay on your feet."

And there he was, off balance again. Strangely enough, this being off balance gave him hope and led him to stay with his teacher.

A traveler had given the governor a fan made of rhinoceros horn, and under the Zen rule that expensive, useless objects flow to those who don't care about them, the governor gave the fan to Yanguan. Everyone forgot about it, until one summer day, Yanguan asked, "Bring me the rhinoceros fan."

"The fan is broken," said the assistant.

"In that case," replied Yanguan, "bring me the rhinoceros."
The assistant was struck dumb.

Another of those present, Zifu, drew a circle and wrote the characters for the word *rhinoceros* inside it.

When Yanguan asked for the rhinoceros it was a world-stopping question for the assistant. The glue that connected one thought to another and that pair of thoughts to another pair and so on—the glue that made his reality—had failed. And this time, he didn't come back into balance. In his silence was a doubt that spread quickly to everything. Yanguan had told him that doubt is a valuable spiritual state, but he hadn't understood. Now he saw that this doubt was a form of spaciousness. It destroyed any trivial thought—almost any thought, actually. His rhinoceros was a doubt about everything he was. He couldn't be sure of his name, his purpose, even of the nature of a tree. He couldn't defend himself, he couldn't speak for himself since, at that moment, he wasn't a somebody to defend or speak for.

All of this happened in the blink of an eye. Yanguan had just asked for the rhinoceros, and Zifu, the other student, was drawing the characters. The assistant became entranced by the swirl of the brush, which seemed just right. It was a perfect gesture among many others—Yanguan's amusement, the jug on the floor.

Other moments and occasions fell into place for the assistant. He remembered times when he had heard the sound of a mallet, or seen geese flying in a lopsided V and somehow joined what he heard and saw. He had felt elevated and expanded for hours.

Once a visitor asked the old master, "What is the real body of the great Sun Buddha?"

The assistant groaned privately. Even he couldn't work out what

the question meant, and it seemed to be far from the man's real life. The assistant was learning some things though: he saw that he was squirming because his own questions were like that too, designed to conceal his own helplessness and fear.

But Yanguan wasn't provoked by helplessness and fear and just said mildly, "Pass me that water pitcher."

The pitcher was in the new style—white with a blue fish—and had also been sent by the governor. The man brought it.

Yanguan then said, "Would you put it back where it was?" The visitor did just that. He was eager to return to his important question, which he repeated. "What is the real body of the great Sun Buddha?"

"That old Buddha died a long time ago," said Yanguan.

The assistant began to laugh inwardly, not at the man but with him; he could see that the simple movement of the water jug held a beauty stronger than any religious idea. The laughter seemed to put him on the verge of a great discovery; then it subsided. The poor visitor had been so intent on his question that he missed the answer—a rhinoceros was in front of him, but he returned resolutely to the fan.

Why, sometimes I've believed as many as
six impossible things before breakfast.

—THE RED QUEEN, RECORDED BY LEWIS CARROLL

WE SOMETIMES THINK of consciousness as a lamp, making a golden cone of light on the surface of a desk. Outside the yellow circle everything is dark and unknown. The usual way of approaching things is to try to extend the yellow circle into the darkness. Or perhaps to drag objects in from the dark. That is working out of what you can conceive of, the bright area of what you already know. This koan takes things the other way. Here you depend on what is unknown and inconceivable to sustain you. Most of life is inconceivable; even your left hand can't be fully conceived of though it can be very useful. And if you try hard to conceive of what your hand does, it won't play the piano very well. The inconceivable is the source of all that comes into being. This koan is not about making what is unknown, known. Instead it is an exercise in relying on and making friends with the inconceivable, using a casual event to start an exploration into the unlit realms.