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## The Circumstance Is the Teaching

PEOPLE SOMETIMES ask me, “Did you have to pass examinations and study a lot to become a priest?” Lived experience is what we need to be priests and teachers. To study the sutras and to know the history of our tradition is fine, but it is only our own lived experience that we can use and give away to someone else.

There was once a monk named Isan, who studied all the Theravada and Mahayana texts, but this didn't seem to make him feel more at ease; in fact, he felt dis-ease. His mind was wobbly. So he went to Master Hyakujo's place, and sat down on a cushion, and sat, and sat, and sat, and after some time he became Hyakujo's attendant monk. One evening, while he was sitting, Hyakujo suddenly said, “Who are you?” The monk, surprised, told him his name. “Go and look in the fire,” Hyakujo said. “See if any burning embers remain.” So he went over to the fire and dug around, dug around, and couldn't find anything. There were just ashes. It was just as his sitting had been—cold ashes. The teacher came over, and dug around with the tongs. Deep in the ashes, he found one tiny ember. He held

it out. And Isan was enlightened. He suddenly realized that deep down inside himself was this living fire.

Deep inside each one of us is this living ember. We must dig down, deeper and deeper, unafraid of what we will find there. This zazen is not just something to make us happy; that's not enough. We go deeper, deeper. Where is that wonderful living coal? So we sit, quietly, intensely, gratefully, joyfully—experiencing for ourselves the living aspects of our sitting.

Some Zen texts refer to the condition in which the mind is like an incense burner in which everything has burned down, burned out. That is a true description, and yet it seems to conflict with this story about the living ember. But please remember that we can never express the essence of Zen with words. We find all kinds of contradictory statements. We can't say Zen is this or that. We must enact it; we must show it through a spontaneous, lively, spirited act. At the same time, Zen is not showing off with wild, eccentric behavior. The action of the moment comes out of long, disciplined practice, and is used to demonstrate the essential teaching without saying one word.

Some time after the above encounter with Hyakujo, Isan showed his understanding through such an act. Among Hyakujo's disciples was a man who was a fortune-teller, basing his predictions upon physiognomy or the aspect of a house or site. One day he came to Hyakujo and said, “I have found a good place to build a monastery. The spirits of the mountain indicate that it has the power to attract fifteen hundred monks.” But, he added, Hyakujo was not to go there himself. “This mountain is round, and you are too thin. If you are there, with your poor physique, only one thousand monks will come; let's try for the maximum number!”

Hyakujo called the monks together so that the fortune-teller could appraise their suitability. The head monk, who thought he would surely be the one, was rejected immediately. Next came Isan, who at the time was working as the *tenzo*, the person

in charge of meals. Instantly, the fortune-teller chose him. And so Hyakujo gave him Dharma transmission, and asked him to establish the new monastery. The head monk, who had an enormous ego, was very angry, and demanded another test. So a public examination was held. Hyakujo assembled the monks once again, and set a water bottle on the floor. "You may not call this a water jug," he told them. "What will you call it?" The head monk's reply was, "It cannot be called a stump." Then Isan was asked for his response, and he immediately kicked it over. He did this with no intention of passing this test, with no conception of whether it would be seen as a good or bad action, he simply responded freely, openly, as if to say, "I'm busy in the kitchen. Let me get back to work."

After he became head of the new monastery, Isan didn't hang a sign out announcing the sitting schedule or public lectures. He just sat, and gradually, people came. Sure enough, eventually fifteen hundred monks assembled. Somehow or other, word gets around about what's going on. I have never advertised our activities at the Cambridge Buddhist Association, and it's hard to find us. The sign on our door is about the size of a postage stamp. Yet somehow people find their way here. When we first acquired the building, I sat by myself, day after day after day. Soon other people came. We put together a sitting schedule according to the times they were arriving. Then we started doing sesshin, and here we are.

Isan took off his cook's headband and put on the yoke of the teacher. It's hard work to be the head of the monastery. It requires constant vigilance. There is no way we can back off, or say, "I can't do this." *I* can't do it; the Dharma has asked that it be done. So we're here.

Everything is our teacher, and is reminding us of the teachings. All the circumstances of our life are teaching us. The real sermon, the real preaching is when people act in ways that are appropriate to the circumstances of their lives. Each one of us

has a profound teaching given to us. Sometimes it is illness, sometimes death.

Yesterday a woman came and told me about the suicide of her father. It was a terrible shock. She had made every effort to make him well: had engaged the finest doctors, the best psychiatrists in the country, the best medicine, the most renowned hospitals, everything. So why did he kill himself? What a teaching that was! He chose, he told her over and over again, not to live. He wanted to give it up. But she kept forcing her own idea on him, that it was better to live. Who knows whether it is better for someone else to live or to die? How do we learn to accept this; how do we learn not to force our egocentric ideas on others, even when we think they are not mentally competent?

We are all given such Zen tests, day by day. What is our test? What is our day-by-day koan? It has nothing to do with searching in books for answers, but with responding as Isan did, creatively and freely. Our responses must come out of our own Zen spirit, not out of some foolish imitation of what we think a spontaneous act would be. Self-consciously unusual or eccentric behavior merely stinks of Zen. With strong, disciplined practice, we discover the emptiness out of which comes true freedom, true creativity.