

Is that So? – from Kannon Do website, Les Kaye

Zen Master Hakuin lived in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. He is said to have created the now-famous question: “What is the sound of one hand clapping?” Hakuin believed that the understanding arising out of practice in everyday life was deeper than the understanding that could come from practicing in the monastery, since lay people faced more distractions, held more responsibilities, and experienced more heartbreak than the monks and so needed to practice with great diligence.

Hakuin was greatly respected and had many disciples. At one time in his life, he lived in a village hermitage, close to a food shop run by a couple and their beautiful, young daughter. One day the parents discovered that their daughter was pregnant. Angry and distraught, they demanded to know the name of the father. At first, the girl would not confess but after much harassment, she named Hakuin. The furious parents confronted Hakuin, berating him in front of all of his students. He simply replied, “Is that so?”

When the baby was born, the family gave it to Hakuin. By this time, he had lost his reputation and his disciples. But Hakuin was not disturbed. He took delight in caring for the infant child; he was able to obtain milk and other essentials from the villagers. A year later, the young mother of the child was troubled by great remorse. She confessed the truth to her parents – the real father was not Hakuin but rather a young man who worked at the local fish market. The mortified parents went to Hakuin, apologizing, asking his forgiveness for the wrong they did him. They asked Hakuin to return the baby. Although he loved the child as his own, Hakuin was willing to give him up without complaint. All he said was: “Is that so?”

We respond in different ways to surprises and disruptive situations: our mind has several levels of acceptance depending on the degree of how our life is impacted. When the telephone rings, we easily accept it with little problem. If we develop a flat tire while driving downtown, we may experience a little bit of upset, a little irritation, but no deep anger towards anyone. But what if the power goes out at home or at work? Or our car gets rear-ended? Considering the resulting trouble and inconvenience, there is a fair chance that we would feel anger, at the utility company or the other driver.

What if we have the unfortunate experience of being laid-off from work? Most of us would be quite upset. Worse yet, what if our wife, or husband, or partner suddenly informs us that he or she has found somebody else and is leaving? Would we be able to remain calm and say, “Is that so?”

Our ordinary mind suffers when it experiences unexpected, life-changing events, particularly when we feel the action was aimed at us personally. But Hakuin’s story is not about ordinary mind – it is an illustration of Buddha mind. It is about what our mind can be, capable of equanimity in all situations. It is a love story – without an object of love – of universal embrace of every situation, without judgment. It illustrates the mind

of practice, of no attachments, and of no “self” to defend, simply of accommodation and taking care.

Very often, people come to Zen practice in search of an epiphany, some kind of enlightenment, to feel special or acquire an exciting power. Discouragement often sets in after a time, as individuals do not recognize that their effort to acquire something is just one more act of striving in an already busy life. Even if an exciting experience does occur, the basic unease remains. Although people believe they need to acquire things to gain happiness, what they really want is the mind of Hakuin, the mind of Buddha, of no suffering, the mind that embraces change without resistance, that understands the true nature of all things. That mind flows from Zen practice; it is the mind of “no mind,” of no discrimination.

As the Fukan Zazengi advises,

*Put aside the intellectual practice of investigating words and chasing phrases, and learn to take the backward step that turns the light and shines it inward.*

This admonition is not so easy to put into practice, requiring complete dedication and a willingness to go beyond the thinking patterns and judgmental tendencies of our usual mind.

Look carefully at a statue or image of Buddha. Note the half-closed eyes and slight smile, expressing wisdom and a mind at rest. And the straight back and upright head expressing discipline and determination. This image has inspired Asian societies for several hundred years. In recent times, Western cultures have become interested in Buddhism; it touches us in emotional and spiritual ways. But for the most part, we have not yet integrated it into our lives. It is still seen as a religious ideal to be admired from a distance or an exotic art to be collected and displayed. The practice of Zen, and Buddhism, is at the beginning stage in the West, not yet fully appreciated, thought to be “too foreign,” or “too difficult.”

The story of Hakuin shows that the equanimity and wisdom of Buddha is possible in the midst of the surprises and difficulties of ordinary life, possible because it is our inherent state: it already exists, we have no need to strive for it. We only need to sit like Buddha – let our posture be Buddha’s posture, let our face be Buddha’s face, and our mind be Buddha’s mind.

Koan questions related to Hakuin and the Baby for discussion:

How do you just go straight on a 99 mile curve?

How do you handle what life throws at you, especially what seems unfair?