

REA LIFE AS KOAN

WE HAVE A COMMON SAYING in the monastery that in order to understand the master's talks on koans, we must spend three years practicing. In other words, it is not so easy to understand what the master is presenting. How much you appreciate the ancient cases is up to you. The *Blue Cliff Record*, one of the major Zen koan collections, contains many different prefaces, appreciatory verses, commentaries, and short critical remarks called capping phrases by different masters. Each of these comments is a gem. Those who appreciate it, appreciate it almost endlessly, just one comment, just one case. But koans are not limited to these ancient cases. You can create koans, too. I want to share with you what koans are as the realization of your life.

As I mentioned before, *ko* in koan is often understood as a government document that has certain authoritative value. But another definition of *ko* is to “make unevenness even.” This is a very interesting definition. And *an* means “let it be,” whatever it is. Could be you, could be me, could be anything. Let a person be as he or she is. In other words, just let it be *as is*.

How can we make the unevenness even? In our life, everything is unique in that no two things are exactly the same. Everything is different, or uneven—amazingly so. For each of us, our gender is different, our length of life is different, the way we study is different, our jobs are different. Even how much we eat is different. What does it mean to make this unevenness, all these differences, even? How is it possible?

It *is* possible. Being different, each is totally absolute! Each difference is totally complete in itself. And being absolute and complete, it is equal to other differences that are absolute and

complete. So *ko* means being different and yet equal. We can say that the absolute makes the unevenness even. We can call it emptiness, or we can call it true self, our original face, *Mu*. Whatever name we use, it is the *unshakeable* aspect. So regardless of how much you complain about the unevenness of your life, there is an unshakable aspect to it!

To really see this absolute aspect is the major point of koan. When you truly see it, you see the relative side without much problem. Everybody, everything, is *just as is* in a particular position. Having a certain status, a certain form, one manifests as that absolute aspect. That is nothing but realization itself, isn't it? We talk as though Ultimate Reality and ordinary reality are two different things. No! Form is emptiness. This body, legs, and hands are empty. All our mental functions such as feelings, sensations, thoughts, are also empty, and therefore, identical.

The absolute values of your life and of everything else are identical. When you truly see this very important point, right there the koan is solved. So without practicing any ancient koans, you can be enlightened and live your life in perfect realization. This is the kind of koan practice I want to share with you. How can we work with this effectively in our practice?

There are many traps relating to our practice. One very tricky trap is this idea of emptiness, of your true self. For instance, Dogen Zenji talks about different kinds of diligent effort. One effort is to do good. But what is meant by that? How do you define it? Dogen Zenji defines doing good as *to realize your true self*. What is that true self? Where is it? We think that there is something that is called true self that exists beyond good or bad, right or wrong, this or that. That is a big trap. Are you looking for something that exists somewhere else, not in your life as is? That is the biggest trap.

In fact, we are already caught in the trap. Why? Because we are human. That means we are conditioned. So be aware that you are already trapped. At the same time, there really is no trap. Why? Because our conditioned self is our true self. Our life *as it is* is in perfect realization. This is a very sneaky aspect. We think something like a trap exists, waiting for us to fall in. But remarkably, there is no such trap to begin with. To think that there is a trap is itself the worst

trap, for what trap can there be when our life *as it is*, with all its aspects, including so-called pitfalls and traps, is the enlightened Way? This is what is meant by making the unevenness even. If we can see this in a direct way, then we are realizing our life as koan.

Koans are also symbolic of our life. Take the koan of Master Isan's Buffalo. Master Isan told a monk, "A hundred years later, I'll be born in front of the temple as a buffalo. Beside the buffalo, the name Monk Isan is written. If you call it a buffalo, it's Monk Isan. And if you call it Monk Isan, it's a buffalo. How do you call it?"

This koan has a further checking point. Daito Kokushi, the second Japanese patriarch in the Rinzai lineage, is considered to be the reincarnation of Master Unmon. Master Unmon lived in China about three hundred to four hundred years prior to him. If Master Daito is the incarnation of Master Unmon, where has he been these three hundred years? That is the koan. What does it have to do with you? That is the point: *What does this have to do with you?* What kind of relationship does it have with your own life?

How can you embody this koan? It could be written on your forehead. Where is the name Shakyamuni Buddha? When you call it Shakyamuni Buddha, it is you! And when it is called you, it is Shakyamuni Buddha. *How do you call it?* Right now, this moment! Do not wait a hundred years to be born somewhere else. *How do you call it?*

We say that every moment we are being born and we are dying. How are we being born and dying moment to moment? This is a wonderful koan. When you know this, you will have no problem enjoying yourself as the incarnation of Shakyamuni Buddha himself. Or of Bodhidharma, or Monk Isan, or a buffalo, or whoever you wish.

Koan is the manifestation of ultimate reality. What is ultimate reality? It is your very life! How is your very life manifesting right now? Is it manifesting as the realization of koan? When you truly manifest koan, then your treasure house will open by itself and you will use it as you wish. Use koan as the key to open the treasure house. Once you open it, what is inside is also koan. And the one who is turning the key is also koan. That treasure is also nothing but yourself, your life. When you realize this, then the koan is in manifestation.