

THE SEVEN WISE SISTERS

THE SEVEN WISE SISTERS is a rather unusual koan from Dogen Zenji's *Eihei Koroku*, his collection of 301 cases.

In India there was a very wealthy family of seven sisters who gathered together for a party every weekend. During a gathering, one of the sisters suggested, "Instead of having a party, let's go to the crematorium. I feel that if we go there, something good will happen." So they went to the crematorium and found corpses. Seeing the dead people, one of the sisters cried out, "All these corpses, where did the persons go?" Upon hearing this, all seven sisters simultaneously attained enlightenment.

The Hindu god Indra witnessed this. Impressed, he descended to talk to the sisters. "This is marvelous," he said, "I want to give you all a reward and will give anything you ask for." The sisters discussed what they wanted. "Do we want jewelry? No! We already have too many jewels. Money? We don't particularly care about it. Clothes? We have enough." Finally, they came up with three wishes and said to Indra, "We appreciate your offer, and have decided upon three things. First, we would like a rootless tree; second, a piece of land where there is no yin and yang; and third, a valley in which there is no echo." Indra said, "These are difficult things to give. Shakyamuni Buddha lives in your country. He will be able to grant your three wishes."

What are these three wishes? First, the sisters wish for a rootless tree. What is the rootless tree? Dogen Zenji says that the rootless tree is the "oak tree in the garden." That is a line from the famous Case 37 in the *Gateless Gate*. The monk asks Master Joshu, "What is the meaning of Bodhidharma's coming from the West?" In other words, what is the most important teaching of the Buddha? Master

Joshu replies, "The oak tree in the garden." Dogen Zenji points to that oak tree in the garden as the rootless tree. The very state of enlightened life itself is now expressed as this rootless tree. How is this rootless tree your life?

The enlightened life is not fixed but free, unattached to any one thing. And yet, each of us is fixed or conditioned in certain ways. For instance, we have the condition of being human, of being a man or a woman, of having a family or being alone. We have certain knowledge giving rise to all sorts of ideas. All kinds of conditions and conditioning are like roots by which we survive. Is there anything wrong with this? Is there anything wrong with being attached to it? Our lives definitely have certain conditions. How is this so-called conditioned life the life of the rootless tree, the enlightened life?

Impermanence is among the Buddha's most fundamental teachings. How is impermanence generally understood? Instead of seeing how everything is constantly changing, we often think that there is something that does not change. Of course, we recognize certain change when it is noticeable, such as when a woman gives birth, when you move to a new home, or when someone leaves you. But are we aware of constant change or true impermanence? No, and consequently we live in a self-centered way. This self-centeredness is not necessarily derogatory of others. We are using self-centeredness here to mean that we create distinctions or certain boundaries where there are none. In one way or another, we are all self-centered. It is obvious that because of this conditioning, we invite problems. It happens because of *me*.

Who is *me*? In a way, all of us know *me*. And in a way, we do not know. We talk about big Self and small self. Is there truly something that is a big Self or a small self? If there is a big Self, can you show me how big it is? Whatever you understand as the small self, can you show me how small it is? How much difference is there between big Self and small self? I know you cannot show this to me. Why not? Because it is sizeless to begin with. This rootless tree is sizeless, constantly changing and unlimited by conditions. This is our life, do you see?

"The oak tree in the garden." The tree in the yard that the monk sees as an object is not at all an object for Master Joshu. There is no

separation between the tree and himself. In fact, most of the time that is how we live. Even when we are not conscious of driving, when we come to a corner we stop, look, then turn and go on. The driver, car, street, signs, and signals *as they are* are all very clear, and yet no division comes up into the conscious mind. Amidst all relative conditions, we are freely driving. That is the rootless tree.

We can also look at the rootless tree a little differently. Let us say, for instance, that you do not understand what this rootless tree is. What is a tree with roots? Do you have a solid root by which your life is firmly grounded? We talk about body and mind in all kinds of ways: physical, emotional, psychological, mental, spiritual. What is the root of all these? Where is it? Is this body and mind solid and firm, stable and well functioning, sucking up enough nutrition from whatever ground on which it grows? On the other hand, if you do not see the solid ground, where could the root be? As a metaphor for your life, does this tree have a root or not? If you say yes, how and where does it grow? If no, why not? If your life has no root, how can you survive? Is having a root real or is not having a root real? Is your life real or is your life unreal? That is a silly question, isn't it? But, in fact, it is a truly fascinating question.

Regarding this rootless tree, Dogen Zenji says further, "If they don't understand the oak tree in the garden, I will hold up my staff and say, 'This staff is it!'" This is his second comment on the rootless tree. The oak tree in the garden and this staff in his hand. How do you appreciate it? "If you don't understand," he says, "this staff is it!" What does the staff stand for? The life of each of us is nothing but this staff, the oak tree, the rootless tree.

The seven sisters' second wish is a "piece of land where there is no yin and yang." Of course, yin and yang refers to opposites, duality. Dogen Zenji says, "This crematorium itself is that land where there is no yin and yang." In this instance, the crematorium is where the story occurs. The sisters ask, "The corpse is here, but where did the person go?" Anywhere, everywhere is nothing but this land where there is no yin and yang. Here, now! When there is death, there is nothing but death. When there is life, there is nothing but life. Dogen Zenji says further, "If they don't understand, I'll tell them that it is the 'Dharmadhatu in all the ten directions.'"

The land where there is no yin and yang is the land upon which we stand right here, now. Even when our life seems fine, we have a problem when we see everything as opposites, as good or bad, right or wrong. What is good, what is bad? For instance, each tree is different. Some trees are big, some are small; some are crooked, some straight. Is there anything wrong with this? Being crooked, it is just crooked. Being straight, it is just straight. Some of us may think crooked is better than straight, or that a crooked tree should be straight. According to how we think about these opposites, problems arise.

Who creates these opposites? You might say that we do. But when we search for the answer, it is always *I* do. You cannot say *we*. What you may think of as good is not necessarily good to me or to someone else. I might compromise with you; I might understand or not understand. So when you say something is good, realize that it is what *you* think of as good. This is always the case. What happens if we do not have this *I*? As a matter of fact, then everything is okay.

The sisters' third wish is for the valley that has no echo. Here Dogen Zenji's comments are more direct. "Regarding this, I would call the seven sisters. If they respond, I will say immediately, 'I have just given you the valley.' And if they don't respond, I will say, 'Indeed, there is no echo.'" Regardless of whether you respond or not, right here you have this valley that has no echo. Fundamentally, our life is this unechoing valley. Our life itself is a synonym for the very best echoless valley. Isn't it marvelous?

In his *Song of Meditation*, Hakuin Zenji says, "All sentient beings are intrinsically buddhas." We are all right to begin with. So when called, just answer. If you cannot answer, that, too, is okay. Regardless of whether you answer or not, you are this fundamentally, originally enlightened ground. We practice on this ground of original enlightenment because that is our life. We do not need to look for anything else because everything is already right here. This life itself, *your* life itself, is the valley that has no echo. When you look for something else, you are putting another head on top of your own.

How do we appreciate the life that we have? Unfortunately, we often experience this life as if it were a roller coaster, spinning

around in the six realms. Sometimes you feel marvelous. The next day, you hit bottom. You go from heaven to hell and all kinds of spheres in between from day to day, maybe even in one day. What are you doing with this life? You ask, "Am I really the same as the buddhas?" Many of you respond, "Hardly." So what will you do?

This is a very common dilemma. That is why if we just rely on one perspective, such as "We are all okay, be just as you are," we fall into a trap. It sounds good, but unfortunately, not all of us can live like that. Something is not quite right. We must examine who we are and truly see what this life is, what is the very nature of existence. This is a very natural inquiry. The important point is to have the understanding that is expressed in the seven sisters' three wishes.

So how do we practice in accordance with the insight of the seven wise sisters? Just sitting is fine. Polishing your insight with koans is also fine. Each of you must find the way in which you can comfortably practice. You are always at the very center. You are already in the Way. The realization of koan is your life! Each of us as we are is the realization of koan. And living our life is the practice of koan.

How can we appreciate our life as the rootless tree, as the land where there is no yin and yang, and as the valley with no echo? How are these three wishes the life of each of us? The important point is this life! Each of us is the treasure. How do we best take care of it? And taking care of this life is the best treasure we can have, isn't it?