
BUTSUGEN:
My Tongue Is Tied

*When inner turmoil overcomes you,
What's to be done?
When your tongue is tied,
Speak! Speak!*

KOAN

Butsugen yearned to become sober so he began attending meetings of Alcoholics Anonymous several times a day. He was told that it was very important to share at the meetings, but he was in a state of such intense inner turmoil that he could not say a word. He tried to speak, but no words came. One night when Butsugen felt that he was truly at the end of his rope, a woman shared, saying words that expressed his own distress and anguish.

In the midst of his anguish, Butsugen smiled.

REFLECTION

Why did Butsugen smile?

Do you know this condition when you must speak but no words come? Staying silent is too painful, yet the voice is paralyzed. It is like the story of a man hanging from a tree branch by his mouth: His hands can't grasp a bough, his feet can't touch the ground. A stranger stands below and shouts, "What is the meaning of your life?"⁶² Or, "What are you really doing at the AA meeting, Butsugen?"

Butsugen yearned for a life beyond his addiction. He attended the AA meetings again and again, each time feeling even more vulnerable. His discomfort was intense and yet he felt powerless to do anything about it. He could not give up on the meetings and yet he could not untie his tongue to speak—he was dangling at the end of his rope, like the person in the tree.

How will you save yourself? Whatever the addiction—alcohol, tobacco, sugar, drugs, or sex—it takes courage to face the deep yearning to find fulfillment in the fullness of your being.

A Zen teacher said, "We are all addicted to the self." So how about the addiction to the ego-centered self? Is clinging to self-centeredness and the unrelenting suffering that ensues an addiction common to everyone? Even if you're not addicted to a substance, do you cling to a sense of a solid, fixed, permanent self that becomes your reference point for everything you think and do? How will you save yourself from that?

Self-centeredness is so ingrained that, like the person up in the tree, it's hard to even consider letting go. You think that holding on will save you or that letting go will kill you. But tell me, *who* is holding on to *what*? As you become even more aware of what

exactly *you* are clinging to, the problem may appear worse than ever! Rest assured, however, that a growing awareness and attention to clinging are big steps toward being free.

The immediate relief for Butsugen came in the form of a woman sharing her own anguish, using the very words he himself would have used had he been able to untie his tongue. When you recognize yourself in another, you expand beyond your limitations. "It is like she was living inside me," Butsugen said. In an instant, he recognized himself and felt recognized, too. He still had to do the challenging inner work needed for sobriety, but when he was at his most vulnerable, another person's words helped him to stay sober for one more day. Truly, there was a lot for Butsugen to smile about. But can you tell me why he smiled?

The journey to sobriety is best undertaken in the company of other like-hearted people. It is a rare gift to meet a healing community. Seeing yourself in others can be profoundly healing. In this way, the Buddhist sangha can fulfill the same function for our addictions to the self as an AA group does for alcoholism. Some Zen communities focus so exclusively on meditation and silence that they barely speak to one another. Once a friend was invited to speak at a Zen group. Noticing that the person who had invited her was not there, she inquired about him by name. No one knew who he was. Perplexed, she described the blue truck that he drove and, at last, everyone said, "Oh, yes, we know the guy who drives the blue truck!"

Many sanghas today, however, have processes like councils, circles, and other such practices that encourage listening and sharing to help you recognize yourself. Butsugen never got to tell the woman how she had saved him that evening. He now takes

THE BOOK OF HOUSEHOLDER KOANS

comfort in the understanding that he too, just by showing up for his life every day, may actually be saving someone else.

How are you showing up?

Speak quickly, speak quickly!

When your tongue is tied, how will you find the way through? Tell me of a moment when you recognized yourself in someone else.