

Even Bricks and Paper Shine

Once a monk asked Joshu, "I have just entered the monastery, please give me instruction."
Joshu said, "Have you had your breakfast?"
"Yes I have," said the monk.
"Then wash your bowls," Joshu replied.
The monk experienced an insight.

In his teisho on this koan, Mumon writes that when Joshu spoke his lips "gave off light".

Joshu's method of teaching was profound and ordinary, subtle and clear. In this story the monk asks, "please give me instruction". This first line is all by itself a wonderful teaching for us. When we are ready to receive the teachings of Zen or in fact, any teaching, we should be docile and open in how we approach them. If we cannot be open, how can anything new enter? Feelings such as pride, competitiveness, the need to be right are all obstacles on the road to awakening.

The truth is already who we are. Therefore, the more we seek the truth, the farther away from it we get. I recall reading somewhere that in Japanese monasteries there is a plank at the entranceway to the zendo that reads, "it's right under your feet". But we don't see it. We are usually looking somewhere else.

Joshu does not offer an intellectual response. Instead he asks an ordinary everyday question. It is a question filled with light though the monk does not recognize it. In asking, "have you had your breakfast yet?" Joshu reveals the heart of the teachings. They are about the action of life rather than a philosophy or idea. There is no theology in it, no doctrine. We might say that Zen centers on the very tasting of life rather than thinking about it. In other words practicing Zen is about being in the activity of our life without adding anything to it with our mental commentary. Seeing that the monk doesn't get it, Joshu tries again, he says, "then go wash your bowls".

Drop your commentary! When you drop it what is left? Your life, open to you, fresh and vibrant. You will see that everything shines, even bricks and paper!

Zen teaches a fundamental insight--that the ineffable is right under our nose. The illusionistic or phenomenal world is not a backdrop for our human actions. To "wash your bowls" is to drop all abstractions and ideas of gaining anything. Joshu could have said, "have you had an insight monk? Then go wash your bowls". This clarifies that there is nothing special to be gained--insight is seeing what is! What can you gain that you don't already have? There is no space or gap between yourself and yourself right? And there is no "I" in the action of washing bowls.

I want to share this great haiku with you all from Master Yuishun. He writes:

Why it is but the motion of eyes and brows
And here I've been seeking it far and wide
Awakened at last
I find the moon above the pines
The river surging high

So there it is. Thank you.

- Ray Cicetti