

GORRICK'S RUN SESSHIN OCTOBER 2008

ROSHI SUSAN MURPHY TEISHO 1: Removing the Octopus from the Face

They reckon we may have to endure at least twelve thousand miracles in the morning and around another four hundred in the afternoon. So, please sit comfortably...

You have probably noticed that we invent the world constantly for ourselves. For example, 'Enlightenment will take a very long time and then I'll break through and everything will be different.' Or 'My life is shit,' you may've heard that one. Or 'Those people, what they've been doing to me?' or 'Just how do you get free?'

You can actually hear a few little hinges creaking in that last one, maybe the barrel of the lock is starting to tumble over.

So we greet each other through encumbrances such as these, even when we suspect they may not be true. Or that they may not really be us. John Tarrant said it's as if we are at a party where everyone has an octopus on his face. We can more or less live with the permanent octopus, but it can seem very hard when we finally try to pry it off.

We are very resourceful in taking care of this semi-permanent mask. It's our skillful means really to do anything, *anything* to stay safe. Luckily, Zen offers us blowtorch questions of various kinds, that can help us pry our knowing off of our original face, which never was encumbered, ever. Indeed, it is so unencumbered it always been the mirror of all that is. So today's talk is on no-octopuss.

Let's look a little way into Xitou's 'Taking Part in the Gathering' This is now part of our Sutra books and from time to time we chant this in our Sutra service. Another translation for it is 'Realizing Unity'. It comes transliterated into Japanese as *Sandokai*, the Chinese is *Canton-Ji*. A strange thing happens to words on their way through languages. So Xitou

is 700-790 a key figure of the early Southern ? period of Chan. Later on his School was called the Hoonan School and it was recognised as one of the two great schools of that time. The other was Matsu's Hunja School for those of you who are pedagogically inclined.

Now not very much is known of Xitou except other people's references to him. But what is known is that he taught this 'What meets the eye is the Way'. So – and this is astonishing only when you realize it - everything you drink in is you. This brings us down to zero, a good place to be.

Daowu asked Xitou, 'Who is it who attains the essential principle?'. Who attains the principle of freedom? Xitou said 'The one who understands Buddha-dharma has attained it.' Daowu said 'Did you attain it?' Xitou said 'I don't understand the Buddha-dharma.'

The Buddha-Dharma is the teaching of the Way, but even more intimately it is simply your own self nature, realization itself – these things are indivisible.

So what is this all about? What is this business about not being able to attain it? It's suggesting you can't 'attain' the way the hair grows on your arm, or the forming a dissolving of clouds. You also can't attain rocks, or people, or frogs. And you certainly cannot dream of attaining your own self-nature. And it's suggesting that to be a non-attained Buddha is simply to be completely free from having or not having anything at all, at home with what is, including octopus on the face. That is in other words to freely walk the red sky, attaining nothing, having nothing to attain.

It seems that there is something profoundly present in this exchange, and in this particular universe, that is bigger than understanding and the grip of the mind, however you like to put it. To attempt to understand it is immediately to reintroduce a self, an object, something to be attained. So this 'don't-know mind' – not at all the same as 'gee whiz, I'm not sure' - is like clear water, very hard to see, and you can't get to the back or the front of it. And all of this is strangely medicinal to our lives.

At another point Daowu came up to him again and said ‘What is the great meaning of the Buddha-Dharma?’ This time Xitou said, ‘Not attaining, not knowing’. Daowu said ‘Is there anything beyond this?’

Is there anything beyond the light on the grass, or the lines in the palm of your own warm hand, is there anything beyond it? Please don’t take this question lightly, or mistake it for a question about transcendence.

Xitou replied, ‘ The sky does not obstruct the white clouds’ light’. And of course neither does it obstruct your own life and death, your sorrow, your joy, the dirt under your own fingernails, all of these are completely unobstructed by the great sky.

By the way I’ve got all this way through a first day talk without even mentioning Mu, or have I? Today’s game is spot the Mu.

So, finally, this is my third and favourite Xitou exchange and it’s actually one I’d like to progressively work into in the next couple of days: A monk asked Xitou ‘How does one get free?’ And he said ‘Who has put you in bondage?’. The monk said ‘What is the pure land?’ Xitou said, ‘Why, who has defiled you?’ The monk said, ‘What is Nirvana?’ – what is freedom from birth and death? - and Xitou said ‘Who has placed you in birth and death?’

Every teacher, indeed everything in the universe, makes an offer of clarity that can be seen in the light of not-understanding, but grasping whole. That’s an offer of freedom. These are the three beautiful offers of freedom of Xitou. And each of them simply comes back to us as a great question. The monk’s questions are good enough to get great questions in reply. Good on him for asking. I remember something that Uncle Max often says: ‘Always ask’. That’s become a tremendous sort of rule for me, always ask. And these questions are very alive.

You know one of the great root stories of our culture as Westerners is the Grail legend. It involves a knight, Parsifal or Percival, who rides out into the great world, into the cosmos in a sense. And he encounters a kingdom where everything is wilting and dying. He learns that the king of this place, the Fisher King, is deeply sick, inclining always towards death. So devoid of life he cannot even reach death, but always inclining that way. The King is awaiting something salvific, a great turning word that can change his circumstances. The Grail castle is in a place called The Wasteland.

First of all it's very rare that anyone can get into the Grail kingdom but through happenstances which I won't go into, Percival makes his way across the bridge at exactly the right time, comes to the Grail castle and is brought into a tremendous banquet hall, a big light place, a bit like this dojo really...another banquet hall. And there is beautiful food laid out, gorgeously-dressed people are serving food, all as if a grave and beautiful ceremony is being conducted. The Fisher King is seated behind the table and Percival is invited to sit beside him.

And at a certain moment, into the room comes an amazing procession of beautiful women bearing an array of mysterious objects. And one of the objects is a cup, an extraordinary cup. These things are being ceremonially paraded through the hall. All eyes are upon them. Everyone is in total silence all. The procession goes slowly there's plenty of time, really, to wonder, 'What's happening, what's this got to do with the sick king beside me, how will he ever get free?' But no, Percival is silent, struck dumb. After all, barely more than a teenager, he's got quite an octopus on his face. Finally, the procession has left the room, and everyone looks at Percival - in grief really. It was his job to do something, he just didn't know what it was. He's a holy fool, a stumble-bum, like us blundering into initiation. Standing before a living miracle, he said nothing.

So he goes to sleep that night, and when he wakes up the castle is completely empty in the morning light. There's not a sign of life, and he's alone. And he mournfully gets back onto his patient horse, somehow aware that this was the most important thing in the world, but also knowing that he has missed it. We all know the feeling. He now knows

that he didn't even know until now that he was seeking something. Now, too late, he burns for it. Is it too late?

Percival, or Parsifal, means 'pierced through the heart, the very core' – heart-rent. The Grail maiden, who leads the procession with the Grail, has a name that means 'rebounding joy'.

Luckily because we're human beings, after a long time and many hazards, the chance comes by again. Percival is given a second chance to come to the Grail castle, a second crack at the secret of freedom. With an old hermit's help, he gets into the Grail castle, the same extraordinary event happens again. The solemn procession bearing the strange cup through the hall... But this time he asks, he asks a great question that comes to him when he sees the Grail, the chalice that is said to hold the blood of Christ. He asks the King, 'Dear Uncle, what ails you?' And he turns and asks the Grail, 'How can I serve you?' Two great questions, life-giving questions. The first saves the world. The second saves even Percival.

I'll leave it to you to find the question that must be asked by you. But asking it changes everything. The Fisher King, the kingdom, the great kingdom of earth comes back to life. All beings are saved when we come back to life.

So there's something very interesting here about curiosity. It is pivotal. It keeps the glow of life in things, in all things. It also shortens the road to freedom. So as Yunmen somewhere says 'Just your question, just your question itself is the point.' Curiosity, that is, a mind and heart inquiring intimately, instinctively placing trust in the unknown - that's the very energy of not knowing, of not trying to control things. Letting go the tremendous effort to control things, to stop the flow. Just as if we didn't really want the green leaves coming out of the bare wood of the tree in spring.

So, that great question 'How do you get free?' and the tremendous reply 'Who - who has bound you?' In taking part in the gathering, Xitou says, 'This is the mysterious source of

the bright is clear and unstained, brightness and light stream from that dark.’ This dark is beyond description, it is beyond, it is beyond word or thought. You will know that when you touch it, when it reaches through and touches you, beyond words or thoughts. We have information for this a thousand times a day and maybe more at night when we finally let go of knowing. It is the source of us, the source of the teaching, it is beyond right and wrong. It is beyond love itself. Nothing, no label, no grip of the mind, can take hold of it. This is a very important point. Whatever our minds can conceive of is not the source itself. We cannot take hold of it. But we can offer ourselves to serve it.

When we practice genuine zazen, and I think everyone in this room appreciates the difference between junk zazen and fair dinkum zazen, you know it, you know it for yourself. At those moments we are intimate, the pure land itself is near. Aitken Roshi re-translated it as ‘not far’ but I like near, the pure land itself is near. Near means intimate. an intimate place it is. The birds are not singing out there. To say ‘out there’ wounds something. It wounds the most important thing in the world. It scours it, stains it, puts a limit on what is as generous and tremendous and unlimited as the sky. The Japanese character for this is Ri -- the source that is beyond words. The Heart Sutra finds its own way to parse this for us: ‘No colour, no smell, no taste, no touch, no object of thought and so on...’.

The source can’t be named, but the branching streams of light that flow in it are all phenomena. They are you, me, that indescribable self, the ruffle of clothes. And the character for this is Ji, but it usually takes some time, several visits to the Grail castle, to begin to appreciate that Ji is inseparable from Ri.

And each being is pure thought, each stream is not separate from thought. Thought is nothing but each being. The pure clear empty thought Ri, is the flow itself, it’s the flow that we are. As the Jisha says at night in the evening ceremony, ‘All things pass quickly away.’ Have you ever realized? That is the source itself! But there’s no way to grasp it conceptually. As Xitou says somewhere else, when one side is bright, the other side is dark.

That's our strange human schtick -- one side bright, one side dark. When emptiness is clear to us, then as the Shodoka says 'When you see clearly there is nothing at all', nothing, there is no limit around a single thing. There's no single thing. And so that's the gift of when things go dark. And then the other side is brighter. The other side is the heart breaking clear into this precious moment, each thing unrepeatable, never to be seen again. Like this moment, never, ever to be here again. The sound of the clappers in the room or the black cockatoo up in the hills, bright, bright.

So generous, this act of not knowing, of entering unawares, of allowing the dark of your own being to be the rich source it always was. The dark of not knowing. Brilliant with branching streams of light inside the dark. Xitou says bright and dark are a pair, like front foot and back foot walking. And when we understand this, after all you can't walk with just one foot, when we understand this we are in Buddha's time. He's up there somewhere on the hill, near a rock, sitting there now in fact, so keep a look out. Spot the moon, even by daylight.

So to come back to Xitou's great question, the question we take up in any sesshin - 'Who has put you in bondage?' At some secret level we all know who is the builder of the house of pain. Even while we protest that it's this or that which is to blame or...Or even when we protest that we are doing it to ourselves, you see the builder is very subtle. It will find a thousand subtle ways to reconstitute a self who is separate, a self who is in exile. That's very subtle building, it's almost continuous, and when we slow down enough we can catch the sound of the little tiny nails being rattled in the nail tin, and the hammer blow, the deft blows of the hammer.

It's not events that make us, that put us in suffering, it is the meaning that we place on events. We suffer because we make up the world with ourselves. A common word for this made up world, which is usually a fairly unkind one, is delusion. Try holding your oldest grief, your most pervasive grief and a question instead of uncertainty. Take up the

warm torch of curiosity and look into it. Try for yourself to see whether, when it meets that warm curiosity, which is the generosity of the mind that does not presume to know..

Try on the in-breath just being the world breathing in, the whole universe breathing in. And on the out-breath, breathe 'I don't know'. Try this over and over, it is a great walk into the dark. It is a great dissolving, 'I' dissolves, the question of *who?* grows more and more interesting. 'Knowing' who we are in a sense got us into our condition in the first place. Not knowing who we are can be a very interesting turn, and a good holiday. The rain last night, it didn't know who we are. The sun at dawn this morning, it had a lot to say but it did not presume to know who we are. From time to time people hear the cliffs roaring in different ways but that roar has nothing to say on the subject of who we are. It does not know, that is the great freedom.

So Buddha nature is a question that doesn't mean anything at all to the deepest *who* that we are. All of us. You remember the old monk's question to Zhaozhou about a dog and Buddha nature. Well that question refers us to times when we refuse some aspect of our lives really. It flirts with 'I'm not beautiful' or 'I don't belong' or 'There is something that should be shut out of heaven and earth'. And 'Mu', the kindly response of Zhaouzhou, is it really saying 'Only don't know'? Is it really a version of the other old koan, 'Who?'. Possibly there is not that much difference, try to find it.

Who? Who am I? Isn't that question hand in glove with 'I don't know'? Who am I when I am - a dog? Who am I when I am a cripple? Who am I when my heart feels crippled and I hold a grudge, when I am certain who I am and don't much like it. So...who am I when I don't have such a story? Who am I when I don't have an octopus on my face? In Alice in Wonderland a caterpillar asks Alice at some point 'Who are you? And Alice said something like 'Well I'm not entirely sure right now Sir... I seemed to know when I got up at breakfast time, but I seem to have changed a thousand times since then.' Alice knows she doesn't know *who*. This makes her bold, and curious. I like her flexibility, too, and it's a lot truer than what we are when we think we know a thing or two, is it not?

Neruda said this, he said “If we were not so single minded about keeping our lives moving and our stories going, and for once could do nothing, perhaps a huge silence might interrupt this sadness of never really meeting ourselves. And of threatening ourselves with death.’

Like Xitou, he’s inviting us to sit at the zero point, to sit at the zero point of feeling, of thought, and to take a deep rest from knowing. Sit there, knock upon yourself as upon a door, ‘I - don’t - know’. Let it come to rest, do nothing but sit at the source and listen, and you will find it comes to completely meet the I of your own heart, the unknowing in ourselves, a perfect match.

Thank you for your trouble.