

SESSHIN AT KIRRIKEE – 13-04-04

CASE 5 – BLUE CLIFF RECORD – XUEFENG’S GRAIN OF RICE

... ‘So when I pick it up this earth is like a grain of rice in size. I cast it down before you. All you black lacquer buckets can’t make it out. Beat the drum. Everyone, gather look for it.’

This koan has the flavour of a dream in some ways, and of a great joke in others. The dharma – indeed our life - is often like that. Let’s look at the dream aspect of it first. Somebody says that they can pick up the whole great earth in a grain of rice and cast it to the ground. How is that possible except in a very great dream?

As you know, the word Buddha means the one who has woken up and even in your sleepest zazen you are still going about the task of waking up, in your depths. And yet on the walls of many old temples you’ll find the character for dream given a place of veneration. Why? Why would dream be venerated? One aspect of waking up is very much waking up from all the old glazed habits of your conditioned mind, my conditioned mind, of seeing through a glass darkly. And waking up is breaking that dark glass. Bright branches of light streaming from the darkness. And yet when we wake, we wake right here in this great dream. In this marvelous, extraordinary inexplicable dream. Look about you. And it’s in this great dream that each tiny detail is extravagantly formed.

And so this koan honours the great dream of the earth of which we are part. It also honours a sense of play. And play and humor of zen is one of the great treasures. It can seem terribly serious sometimes. If you happen to stand outside a zendo and look in. What? To actually catch sight of that play is a gradually deepening matter and to be able to play is a gradually available matter. To be able to play becomes possible because of the rigour of the form is so generous. The rigour is simple and yet it’s very exact. Like the rules of any great game. And as you know when the rules are not treated properly the game collapses. You can surely remember that as a child. How much someone could stumble in, perhaps a helpful adult, a clumsily playful adult and ruin the game if they didn’t know the rules.

There’s a lovely moment in a Helen Garner story called *Little Helen’s Sunday Afternoon*. And it’s about that time of life when little Helen whenever she arrives at a relative’s house is always told, how big you’ve grown, almost in disappointment. And people say, look how big her shoes are now, and little Helen is in that slightly displaced realm. The older cousins are down in

the back shed and it's not quite clear what they're doing but she doesn't feel it's her realm yet. It seems a little strange so she goes back into the house and she finds that her mother and her aunt are in the bedroom and they're trying on clothes and they said, that's you out there Helen, come on in you can play with us, but little Helen didn't want to play with them. The mother looks out with a pillbox hat on and just a slip and Helen looks at her again and thinks 'No, I don't want to play with them' because when they played games they tended to not respect the rules, they broke the rules and the game was no good. They tended to talk about the price of the clothes and boring things like that.

The rules support the play. The breaking of the rules destroys the play that the form makes possible. So, just as the earth contains every kind of substance, the dharma contains every kind of human possibility including play and dream. When I place the incense in the ground there's actually a corroded little pile of wombat poo in which I place it. The earth, this whole earth. And Yunmen once said, 'The whole earth is medicine. The whole great earth is medicine.' That directly answers to the sickness.

Xuefeng casts it down before you. Every teisho casts it down before you. It might be hard to see but it is cast down before you. He goes on to say, 'All you black lacquer buckets can't make it out.' Black lacquer buckets is an old Chinese expression for, in a sense, a kind of well of deep empty samadhi, samadhi of emptiness, samadhi states that are very deep and very full of a certain kind of emptiness but somehow empty-hearted, not yet fully born and awake.

Traditionally the black lacquer bucket is seen as having a bottom that finally abruptly falls out. When the bottom falls out then a grain of rice can reveal a whole great earth. Any tiny particular can break your heart. Even a gum leaf trodden in to the concrete floor of the dojo can be enough. There is nothing without extraordinary value in the great dream in which we find ourselves waking up. We wake up into that dream. And indeed sesshin is very much a place where we gather and beat the drum and gather to look for it with all your heart. What grain of rice? Where is it? Is that grain of rice still here now? Can it be found?

Sometimes you can hear the words of one teacher echoing in the words of the teacher who follows echoing in the words of the teacher who follows them and there's a lovely chain of this which will give you a little bit more of a sense of the rough play of Xuefeng and how earthy and humorous he could be.

Another time Xuefeng said, ‘The whole great earth is in the single eye of a monk. A single eye. A single eye. So people where will you go to take a shit?’ he said. Now listen for the words he is echoing from his teacher, Changsa.

‘The entire universe is in your eye,’ said Changsa, ‘the entire universe is your complete body, the universe is your own luminance, your own bright light. In the entire universe there is no one who is not your own self.’

Listening to these two, can you tell which one has taken the decisive step off the hundred foot pole?

Yunmen was the greatest disciple of Xuefeng, and later on, when Yunmen was asked what is the meaning of Zen, he replied, ‘Dried shit’. This was so confronting to many translators that they agreed amongst themselves that he must have meant dried shitstick, which is one step removed. In the old days people didn’t have toilet paper – instead, they used an old stick which they bound around with some cloth. After a while they would be discarded, and no doubt they turned up here and there on the path. But no, the characters are very plain. It’s dried shit. The *whole* earth is medicine. The whole great earthy earth is medicine, not the whole earth except for shit and toilet paper. And there is no rubbishing of a single thing when Yunmen bows to dried shit. It’s good to let these old masters take on flesh and blood and earthiness. If we talk about them too reverently we can’t meet them so easily here today in our own ordinary lives and magical bodies, which we must do, which we can do, which we will do. They’re here!

Xuefeng’s dates are in the nine hundreds, the later part of the T’ang dynasty. It’s said of him that he had an extraordinary experience even as a child in arms. His mother was carrying him somewhere and a funeral procession went past with its blossoms heaped on the coffin and banners flying and his whole countenance was said to have changed and his character changed and at the age of nine he insisted that he wanted to become a monk. His parents had doubts about the wisdom of this course of events at the age of nine but they could only hold him back until the age of twelve. He happened to meet a teacher and simply never went home from that time. He stayed with that teacher, for many years. Interestingly it is said he first studied precept Zen for many many years before he began to sit in zazen, to develop his prajna, his single eye. Sometimes I think we fail to see that zazen *is* precept Zen. You would be wise to take up the spirit of the precepts or let the precepts take you up, whenever you hear about them whenever your heart opens in that direction. Then your zazen will soften and open the way the great earth does to you, deep in sesshin,

When Xuefeng was around the age of 24, Buddhism went through one of its many persecutions in China and monasteries were burnt and people were killed and many Zen students at that stage dressed themselves in one of the two other costumes available in old China at that time. You could dress as a Confucian, a Taoist or a Buddhist. So he would dress as a Confucian and went about secretly visiting zen masters. He did a great deal of going about, going about. Later on when the persecution lifted and he could do this more obviously without having to hide his robes under his Confucian outfit.

He became a man who travelled a lot, one who endlessly went from teacher to teacher. It was as though he was living out the way that his heart could not come fully to rest. He had many little experiences with different teachers but nothing that convinced his own heart. So he was left always thinking – Hmm, it might be better with that teacher, I remember it was good there; I'll go back there. He was a little bit like a ping pong ball. He tended to travel with his little rice pot and ladle and he would take the role of the rice steward wherever he wound up.

Of course all of this coming and going from one teacher to another saved him from giving himself completely to the task. He did always feel he must honour that other teacher, and his heart was never quite here. Always a little haunted by doubt. So his moment finally came to a stop when he was travelling with his dharma brother, Yentou. Yentou was more senior in the dharma. They were travelling together, and they were caught in a mountain pass when it began to snow very heavily. They had no choice but to take shelter in a little hut in a mountain village on Tortoise Mountain.

In such a situation, with the snow endlessly falling there was nothing much to do but sleep or meditate. Yentou took the first option. He mainly slept. They had travelled a long way. Meanwhile Xuefeng sat up day and night, boring down into the matter as deeply as he could. Yentou would roll over and say, 'Oh, are you still doing that, go back to sleep'. And day and night this went on until Yentou finally sat up and said 'What are you doing sitting there like a little wooden Buddha by the roadside?'

And Xuefeng said, 'My heart is not yet at rest.' These are beautiful words – he knew where he stood, and when you can notice and bring out your secret fear then already generosity and change is beginning in you. So Yentou said, 'OK, bring out what you know and I'll test you with it. Let me hear it.' And Xuefeng then began to bring out example after example of times when he came up to the gate and the gate began to swing open and he thought what about that other teacher.

And each time Yentou would say 'Ok I'll spare you thirty blows for that one.' Or he'd say, 'For the next thirty years, don't speak of this again.' Or he'd say, 'That's so you'll never say it yourself.' And finally Xuefeng said, 'When I was at Deshan's temple I asked him, "Can a student like me understand the ancient teachings?"' And Deshan, who would have been eighty some years old at that stage, managed to get up to his feet and totter over and land a blow on him, saying 'What did you say?' And Xuefeng said, 'At that moment it was like the bottom falling out of a bucket of water.' Yentou said, 'Haven't you heard it said that whatever comes in through the gate is not the family treasure. Whatever amazing teachings you have accumulated, that is not the great jewel that we all share. That has been yours from the beginning. That jewel cannot come in through any gate. It's already here.'

He gave a great shout - 'Khaaaaaa!!!!' - which left Xuefeng both very deaf and very ready and right to hear the Yentou's words: 'Haven't you heard it said that what comes in through the gate is not the family treasure.' And he went on to say, '*You must let it flow out from your own breast to cover heaven and earth for me.*' Then you will have your own small portion of realization.

That shout and everything was gone. Those words, and every part of Xuefeng joined up with all that is, and with tears streaming from his face Xuefeng said, 'Today, Tortoise Mountain is enlightened! Tortoise Mountain is enlightened!.'

He had picked up the whole great earth in his hand at last.

Yentou's great shout is almost the one powerful thing that is remembered of him. Later on, when bandits came bursting in to the temple and everyone else had fled, he refused to budge. He just sat fiercely in zazen, and he was run through by the sword of a bandit. As he was run through, he let out his great shout, which is said to have deafened people for miles. It echoed through the centuries to deafen Hakuin Zenji in Japan in the seventeenth century. In one of his realization experiences, Hakuin heard Yentou's great shout and he ran out from where he was sitting, crying, 'Yentou is alive and well today!!!.

So Kirrikee hillside might not yet be enlightened. Well, what do you think? By now in sesshin it has certainly been pouring itself out for us unceasingly for some time. Look and you'll see that nothing is withheld, nothing. Listen. The teisho of the earth is subtle and continuous.

By now you've probably begun not only to touch that state of absorption in zazen but to recognise it equally in the great earth. Mary Oliver noticed this in her poem, 'Sleeping in the Forest':

I thought the earth remembered me,
 she took me back so tenderly
 arranging her skirts,
 her pockets full of lichens and seeds.
 I slept as never before,
 a stone on the riverbed,
 nothing between me and the
 white fire of the stars but my thoughts,
 and they floated light as moths
 among the branches of the perfect trees.
 All night I heard the small kingdoms
 breathing around me,
 the insects and the birds
 who do their work in darkness.
 All night I rose and fell as if in water,
 grappling with a luminous doom. By morning
 I had vanished at least a dozen times
 into something better.

Perhaps childhood is the time when the earth remembers us best and most clearly, and after that it can be quite a long journey back to be remembered as clearly as that by the earth.

I can remember walking with my sister in the very early morning when everyone else was asleep in North Queensland, in Cairns, or rather just out of Cairns. The earth would be very heavy with dew. It was a first morning. Each one was a first morning and our footsteps across the dewy grass were the first footsteps. And we seemed to have naming powers over the world – we freely named and invented and knew things, and when we didn't know things we were generous and free to make them up and so the world was made, and where we truly didn't know things we seemed to

have absolute confidence that we could put that not knowing aside for now and get on with the sheer mystery of it, the sheer fact of it in its mysteriousness, and that is such a valuable way to be. And Zen is very much a part of remembering that relationship with the natural, the soft natural way of the world.

There's an old Hasidic story about Rabbi Schneur. After he had died, people were talking about him lovingly and someone remembered how every day he would go down to the pond just down the hill and stay there for a long time as the dark came down around him. He would just disappear into that dark by the pond. And they wondered - what was he doing down there, what was that about?

Someone spoke up, and said, 'He was learning the words with which the frogs praise God. It takes a long time to learn that song.'

So we're now in the depths of sesshin, when allowing yourself to become absorbed in the breath and silence and earth is not quite so difficult. It's almost more difficult *not* to begin to learn the words with which the frogs praise God. The earth begins to remember us and put us back together and that absorption grows deep and we grow still in wonder. If you persevere in this way you will begin to find the bright light hidden in your body. It's hidden in your body and it's openly radiant in every leaf on the ground and in the trees. That bright light.

If you want something that can't be taken away from you then you must really penetrate right now, you must find Xuefeng's grain of rice. It's still here. What is it? Where is it? So please - never stop beating the drum and searching for it. Don't throw away your time. Look for it right where you are.

Thank you for your trouble.