

## Out On A Lark

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Ideally, zen monasteries would be places where the words "Zen" and "practice" are never uttered, Dharma talks are not given, and the word "compassion" is not part of the vocabulary. It would be a place where, when the residents are hungry, they eat; when sleepy, they sleep. Someone said, "France is the only country where French is not spoken." He meant that in France, people simply converse and waste no thought on "speaking French." So with Zen we seek Zen that is uncontaminated with Zen. "Without moving your lips, how would you say it?" goes a Koan. It is like asking, "Without speaking French, how do you speak French?" We can spend a long time trying to tease meaning out of "Zen paradoxes," or we can enter the spirit of Sesshin and do Zazen unconditionally.

On the third night of this Sesshin [Anniversary Sesshin, 2001], you remember the moth flapping about on the left side of the altar. It flew in through the open doors behind the altar, and aimed for the hallway light behind the altar. Then seeing the brighter light over the altar, it changed its focus and went after that light. It assaulted the light, dazed itself with the impact of hitting the bulb, then fell to the floor. Then it would get up, flap about blindly, and once again attacked the light. It was the largest moth I've ever seen, bigger than a butterfly, as large as a small bat. Thack! It hit the bulb hard, shaking off dust motes that drifted down in the light, and fell to the floor.

When we feel we are working hard during Sesshin, we feel like that moth headed for the light. We zero in on Mu; we hyperventilate, we shout. We bang our heads against this unyielding Mu. We want the light of Mu, but Mu remains a blank; we don't know if we're hot or cold. And we go a little bit crazy. It is hardly the serene, pacific, meditation that we anticipated. Perhaps we should give up Sesshin, quit this whole enterprise, cut our losses and walk away from this practice. We feel it is stupid to go on.

Master Mumon, the compiler of the Mumonkan, describes Mu as "swallowing a red-hot iron ball you cannot disgorge." "Impossible," you say, or "absurd." If we have not experienced what he is describing, it does not occur to us that he is describing a crisis in our practice, the point where we feel we can't continue, where we want to back off but can't, because we are in the throes of Mu. Mumon's words are not meant to be mysterious; he is trying to describe an impasse in our practice that we don't have the language for. At this point, a most amazing thing happens. No matter how absurd and odd it is to be sitting here, asking, "What is Mu?, Mu! Mu!?" we experience a change of heart. We assent to the absurd. Why not continue, all the way? Having come all this way (and feeling stupid and frustrated), why not go all the way? The "spiritual journey" is never

rational. In every case where the journey is real, it requires what Mu requires of us: faith that Rinzai and Hakuin, and all the patriarchs, had indeed seen and passed through the same "barrier" that we now face. By their own account, they had seen something wonderful, and we have the faith that we, too (after all, no supernatural power is required), can see the same wonder. And so, dazed, like the moth, we rouse ourselves to continue. "It was as though I was frozen solid in the midst of an ice sheet extending tens of thousands of miles." Thus Master Hakuin (ca. 1680) described his impasse with Mu.

We cannot say that Mu is "poetic" or "paradoxical." If you are doing Mu-practice, you know that no amount of description can convey what Mu is. The virtue of Mu as a koan is how unyielding it is, how aloof it is from any kind of interpretation. We have to have the faith and confidence to say, "Yes, even this Mu can be seen and understood, even if it now appears to be totally absurd." Only faith can lead us through the absurdity of Mu practice.

Fortunately there is life after Mu. Life becomes very ordinary after Mu. Life after Mu is in fact like life before Mu. We will never forget the time of Mu, but we discover, to our delight, that Koans come in many flavors. There are koans that are poetic, others that are poetic and funny, and still others that resonate with spiritual power. If all koans were like Mu, unyielding and remote, we would look for the plain light of day, for a breath of ordinary air.

So I come to today's text, Case 36 in the Hekiganroku "Chosha Went for a Walk."

One day Chosha went for a walk.

When he returned to the gate, the head monk said, "Osho, where have you been strolling?"

Chosha said, "I have come from walking in the hills."

The head monk said, "Where have you been?"

Chosha said, "First I went following the fragrant grasses, and now I have returned in pursuit of the falling blossoms."

The head monk said, "You are full of the spring."

Chosha said, "Better than the autumn leaves falling on the lotus leaves."

[Setcho says, "Thank you for your answer."]

Do you remember your last walk, or the last time you went jogging? What kind of walk or jog was it? Often we see someone jogging with walkman headphones on. Now and then, his head will nod to the beat of a song no one else can hear. As he jogs, is there something missing in his surroundings that he needs the added stimulus of "background music"? There's nothing wrong with having a walkman; but we can ask ourselves, what do we hear when we're out walking or jogging? Do we hear the static of irritation over the sound of birds or silence? We notice that during "good Zazen" we don't hear our internal and habitual walkman. By

concentrating on our breath, by Mu-work, our attention is "one-pointed" and effectively jams our habitual internal static.

Many students say, "The sound of birds are so clear." "I could watch the light change from daytime to evening." Now the world is fresh, alive. Is this simply because the hours of sitting during Sesshin is a time of sense-deprivation? I would say that Zazen practice is self-deprivation: the "Me" that is too much with us, with all its demands and preoccupations, recedes. This is what "paying attention" does. Simply note that "Me" always fades into the background when we are paying attention to what is before our eyes. Note that the demanding "Me" is never an effect of paying attention. Have you disappeared because the "self is not there?" Of course not. Isn't there someone hearing the sound of birds? The evictions of the self are always temporary; we always remember that time, "when I wasn't really there." Does it seem a paradox that in the best times of our lives, "we weren't really there?"

A Zen proverb goes, "When you catch the fish, forget the net." It means, when you grasp Mu, throw it away. When you have insight, don't make a big deal out of it.

"Fishing" is called practice, and "forgetting" is "ordinary life": having studied Zen, our life is uncontaminated with Zen. Master Chosha (d. 868), of today's koan, is primarily remembered for a breathtaking verse:

You may not perch on the top  
of the hundred foot pole.  
Beyond is a majestic path  
that few people walk.

So Master Chosha, in answer to the question, "Where have you been?" replied, "First I went following the fragrant grasses, and now I have returned in pursuit of the falling blossoms."

What can you say about your walk?

(Thank you for your answer.)