

The Golden Wind

From about the middle of September to the middle of October, the color of the leaves around Beecher Lake and Dai Bosatsu Mountain changes from green to yellow and red. This has been true for countless decades. The wind becomes chilly and crisp, and this particular wind is called the Golden Wind.

A monk asked Master Ummon, “What will happen when the trees wither and leaves fall?”

Ummon replied, “The Golden Wind blows.”

In the past, I have spoken on this koan many times, but today I am examining it from a slightly different perspective. It goes without saying that the monk was not asking about trees and leaves in the literal sense. Naturally, he was talking about our state of mind. When we are young, just like the trees in the mountains, we have many green leaves, such as ambition, anxiety, desire, and uncertainty, as well as hopes and dreams.

When we experience a certain amount of human life and have confronted difficulties and *disappointments one after another, these leaves fall one by one, like the leaves on the trees in the mountains. But when we become almost leafless, amazingly enough, we discover that we still have many hidden leaves, such as attachment, fear of death, regret, and others.*

Whenever I read this koan, particularly in the autumn, I am compelled to ask myself, can I honestly say the Golden Wind blows in my heart?

So far the answer is, “Not yet... not yet.”

When will I be able to say the Golden Wind

blows in my heart—at *any* time throughout the year—without experiencing the things I mentioned above? If there is any objective in life, this one is mine.

The other day I received an e-mail with a short article about a therapist in Hawaii who had the ability to heal mentally ill prison inmates without even seeing them. At first, I was half-believing, half-doubting. But as I continued reading the article, I couldn’t help but agree with this doctor’s methods.

The article talked about “total responsibility.” In general, it means that we are ultimately responsible for what we think, speak, and do, and beyond that things are out of our control. We are responsible for what *we* do, but not what *anyone else* does. Thus, we live in our own separate, individual worlds, and within these small worlds we cry with sadness and loss and we smile with happiness and gain.

But having practiced zazen for almost my entire life, and having experienced many difficult things, such as bitterness, accusations, and unbelievable surprises, particularly as a foreigner coming to the United States, my personal definition of total responsibility has changed from what I used to think. To me, total responsibility means that *everything*—literally every single phenomenon inside and outside of my being—is wholly a projection of myself.

It is entirely my responsibility when things happen, including witnessing some troubled

students come and go. We find it easy to blame them or dismiss them: "He's crazy." "She's a piece of work." But this is just a mere expression of our own frustration, and we don't realize that by saying such things, the situation often becomes even worse. We don't have the guts to accept that the problem isn't with *them*, but it's within *us*. There is only one way to truly help others, and that is to improve ourselves.

More and more, I think and feel that we all live in three concurrent worlds: the smallest one is our own separate, individual world—the world of intimate things that only we ourselves know, such as our childhood, school experiences, memories, friendships, and so on. For each of us, this is our personal world, which nobody else knows as precisely as we do. The second world is the world that encompasses our society: the common cultural interests we share and the basic feelings that we all experience together. The third world is the entire universe as one immense realm.

Within the first world, it is very easy to take personal responsibility, as its contents are solely of our own construct. We built these worlds from our own unique thoughts, feelings, and experiences. There are also layers of karmic conditions accumulated over many lifetimes, even though we do not have a conscious memory of them. Whether we acknowledge it or not, these are still the result of our own deeds.

Within the third world, it is also relatively easy to take total responsibility, because as Zen practitioners we are able to cultivate a state of mind through deep zazen in which any gaps or boundaries between ourselves and the vast universe often disappear.

It's within the second world that it's the most difficult to accept and acknowledge our personal responsibility. For example, consider the current president of the United States. Is he also a projection of ourselves?

In *The Book of Rinzai*, there is a saying: "Whether you are facing internally or externally, whatever you meet, kill it. If you meet a buddha, kill the buddha. If you meet a patriarch, kill the patriarch." Now in reality, as long as you live within the second world, do you think you can expect to meet a buddha or a patriarch on Broadway? No. But without fail, from dawn to dusk, you are always meeting yourself. What Master Rinzai is saying is kill yourself; in other words, change yourself. Everyone you see, whether they are a buddha, a patriarch, the president, or whom-ever, these figures are none other than mirrors, reflecting your own self-image.

People often say zazen is difficult because of the concentration required, having to endure excruciating pain, and so on, but that is not the point. Zazen is difficult precisely because it is so hard

for us to accept that these seemingly external phenomena are our own projections and reflections, or even our own creations.

We often speak of compassion and wisdom. But concretely, what are they? Getting back to this Hawaiian therapist, when he was asked how he healed his mentally ill patients without ever seeing them face-to-face, he replied, "I just keep saying, 'I'm sorry' and 'I love you' over and over."

Some of you may agree immediately that this is *it*. And some of you may laugh at me. If you agree, the Golden Wind is already blowing in your heart. If not, your leaves are still attached to your tree.

Years ago, while I was attendant monk to Gempo Roshi, I went up to his quarters one day and witnessed a strange sight. He was kneeling on the floor, bowing deeply, and saying softly, over and over, "I am so sorry, please forgive me."

When I asked him what was the matter, he told me that while entertaining a guest, he accidentally said something insensitive and hurt his visitor's feelings. So he was apologizing to his guest by kneeling in the direction of his house and expressing his deep regret at having been hurtful, however unintentionally.

When I heard this as a training monk, I didn't get it. I thought he could wait until he next met the person face-to-face and then work to recreate a harmonious relationship. Or he could write an apologetic letter or make a telephone call. But once the guest's heart was hurt, Gempo Roshi felt it very deeply in his own heart, too.

This story about Gempo Roshi, and the story about the Hawaiian therapist, are the same as Master Ummon's Golden Wind: it is *always* blowing in their hearts, as they live in the world where there are no boundaries between "self" and "others." They have the guts to say, "I am sorry," and in this way are expressing deep love for each one of us. To accept this love and say, "I'm sorry. I love you. Thank you" is far more difficult than attending Rohatsu sesshin. But we *have* to do this; otherwise the world cannot be changed.

I must mention one caution: in the Zen tradition, we often hear expressions such as "suchness" and "accept things as they are." While these statements are true, they may be a bit misleading. There is an unspoken, underlying truth that things are changing moment by moment. Accepting suchness does not mean that no effort is necessary on your part. A spinning top appears to be stationary, despite being in motion. It is precisely this motion that keeps the top suspended upright. In much the same way, the man of buji is the busiest man, as he needs to change himself and improve himself moment by moment. *This* is the significance of our practice.

Thus the Golden Wind blows throughout the year and throughout our lives. ●

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