

Sixteen Bodhisattvas Enter the Bath

(An edited transcription of a teisho given by Roshi Bodhin Kjolhede on the 7th day of the 1994 June sesshin.)

Today we'll take up a koan in the *Blue Cliff Record*, case seventy-eight, "Sixteen Bodhisattvas Enter the Bath":

In ancient times there were sixteen bodhisattvas who at the monks' bath time, following the rule, filed in to bathe. Suddenly they experienced realization through the touch of the water. You Zen worthies, how will you understand their saying, "Experiencing the subtle and clear touch, we have achieved the status of sons of Buddha"? You will be able to attain to this only after seven times piercing and eight times breaking through.

This koan is taken from an episode in the *Surangama Sutra*, one of the great Mahayana Buddhist scriptures, in which twenty-five bodhisattvas relate their experiences of awakening.

To put the word "bodhisattva" in perspective, let's first look at what "Buddha" means. In a wide sense we can say that anyone who has awakened to his or her True Nature, even to a small degree, may be considered a Buddha, inasmuch as he has had a bit of the same experience as Shakyamuni Buddha. An initial kensho is just a sip from the ocean of the Buddha's wisdom, and yet it's the same water that the Buddha drank from so deeply. A stricter definition of Buddha would be a perfectly enlightened being. According to Buddhist cosmology, there is only one full Buddha in every world cycle. In ours that was Shakyamuni. But he was not the very first such fully awakened being; in other cycles of time, in previous existences, there were other Buddhas. When we chant the Ancestral Line, we begin with the names of the seven Buddhas who preceded Shakyamuni. This is just a convention to represent all Buddhas since beginningless time.

Turning now to bodhisattvas, in the historical sense they were the great enlightened disciples of Shakyamuni, flesh-and-blood people who had come to deep realization. Broadening the definition somewhat, we can regard as a bodhisattva anyone who, though having awakened to her True Nature, is still at some level of the mind subtly attached to the notion of "others" who need help. A Buddha doesn't set out to help

others; a Buddha helps others as naturally as breathing. From this point of view we could say that a bodhisattva, no matter how deeply enlightened, is still a notch below a Buddha in spiritual evolution.

Literally, bodhisattva means “wisdom being,” or “enlightened being.” *Bodhi* is our mind of innate wisdom. But in the widest sense, a bodhisattva is anyone who puts her or his own welfare after that of others, anyone who unselfishly gives of himself for the sake of others. In that sense we know that there are many, many bodhisattvas in this world. The obvious famous names come up, such as Mother Teresa and Martin Luther King, perhaps the Dalai Lama, but there are surely thousands of others, in ordinary walks of life, who, once or many times, reach out to help others.

Getting back to our koan, we find all these bodhisattvas in the *Surangama Sutra* who are recounting their enlightenment experiences. Reading now from *Two Zen Classics: Mumonkan and Hekiganroku*, by Katsuki Sekida, we have this account from the *Surangama Sutra*: The first bodhisattva says, “As for my realization, seeing a sight was the primary cause of it.” The second says, “Smelling a fragrance was the cause of my realization.” The third one cites taste as the cause of his realization. The fourth one, and fifteen other bodhisattvas besides – the sixteen of this koan – make obeisance to the Buddha, and one of them, the spokes-bodhisattva [laughter], says, “We formerly heard the preaching of the first Buddha and became monks. At the monks’ bath time, following the rule, we entered the bathroom . . .” And he goes on to relate their experiences. In this account the first bodhisattva says, “We did not wash off dirt, did not wash the body.” How do you understand that statement? Finally the bodhisattva Avalokitesvara (Kannon) tells of his awakening to sound.

Notice that in each of these stories of awakening the precipitating cause was a sensory experience. This is a point of central importance to this koan. There is this common notion that sense experiences are antagonistic to spiritual experiences. But this is not so. Our five senses do not contaminate the purity of our innate Mind. Rather, it is our mentally *clinging* to the sensation that obscures Reality. It is what immediately follows that first, direct perception of seeing, hearing, tasting, etc. – that is what we can get attached to. Thinking about it, judging it, evaluating it, reflecting on it – all of this takes us away from the present. But there is nothing in sensing directly, cleanly, that is any kind of problem to practice. And when our mind is undivided, when it is clear and empty, then any sensation can open the mind. Even thinking, which in Buddhism is considered a sixth sense activity, need not be a hindrance if we are *just* thinking – that is, using the intellect in a pure,

undivided, and conscious way. Words are another gate, and we can come to awakening through hearing them uttered no-mindedly. But it has to be heard no-mindedly, a transmission from no-self to no-self.

All of us have heard the stories of masters who came to awakening through some chance sound: a shout, a shower of rain, the *tock* of a stone hitting a tile. Zen master Hakuin came to one of his many awakenings through hearing the sound of falling snow. There are also stories of people awakening through sight; for one man it happened upon seeing lower petals falling. Another example is the case of a Chinese or Japanese monk who, while urinating, came to awakening at the sight of the bubbles breaking.



Seeing the bubbles in urine can awaken the mind as easily as seeing gorgeous petals falling? Why not? In this world of phenomena, if one's mind is untainted with notions of pure and impure, sacred or profane, high or low – and that's the way one's mind is when it's empty – then anything has equal power to awaken the mind. Every single thing is revealing the Truth.

Zen Master Yunmen (Ummon) once asked, "What is Buddha?" and then he himself replied, "A shit stick!" Toilet paper is expressing this inexpressible Truth equally with the most exalted sutra. The muffler under one's car is doing the same. The trash in the gutter *perfectly* expresses this unfathomable Mind.

In Buddhism there is the teaching of the three emptinesses: the emptiness of the sensor, the emptiness of the sense-object, and the emptiness of the act of sensing. The emptiness of the sensor is the

teaching of “no-self.” If there is no self, there is also no object. And if there is neither self nor object, how can there be the act of sensing? But then what is this that we feel, hear, see, smell, touch, and think? To say that it doesn’t exist is also wrong. What is THIS [strikes lectern]?

Earlier in sesshin we read from Yuan-wu. He was reviewing a number of koans, and said, “these are all strung on one thread.” We could also say that the sensor, the sense-object, and the act of sensing are strung on one thread. So, if one of them is inherently without substance, then all three have to be.

But when the sixteen bodhisattvas entered the water, they weren’t thinking about any of this. If it was India where this happened, it was probably baking hot, and the bath might have actually been a pool of cool water. When they entered this water, there couldn’t have been a trace of conceptualization in their minds. Genuine awakening can occur only via an empty mind. They couldn’t have had even the most subtle thought of awakening itself, not even faintly, way in the back of the mind. Such a thought can only exist in a context of self-and-other. Self-consciousness and the thought of awakening – these, too, are strung on the same thread: the thread of dualism.

You Zen worthies, how will you understand their saying, experiencing the subtle and clear touch, we have achieved the status of sons of Buddha”?

“We have *achieved* the status of sons of Buddha”? Now, one may wonder here, would bodhisattvas talk like that? It sounds suspiciously close to boasting. But look beyond the words. Normally ascribing this awakening experience to oneself – taking credit for it – would belie the validity of it. To say, “I have it,” when referring to enlightenment, would seem selfcontradictory.

To be a bodhisattva means not to be thinking of oneself or of one’s own attainments, but only of how to serve others. This is the ultimate catch in aspiring to awakening: as long as we *want* it, as something we can “get” and hold onto for ourselves, then we are still stuck with the notion of self. The thought of gaining anything is lethal, it just cleaves the mind. Now, if what inspires us in our striving is instead the sense that through awakening we will be able to serve others more purely, and give more freely, that is a more promising motivation. But that desire, lofty as it is, is still a thought-form that mars the fundamental emptiness of our unborn Buddha-mind. We must empty the mind of even the unselfish wishes of the bodhisattva in order to become complete Buddhas. When there is nothing in the mind – Nothing – we will have become what we always were: buddha. Zen master Dogen offers us a glimpse of this:

Midnight.
No waves, no wind,
the empty boat
is flooded with moonlight.

Until full buddhahood, however, we can all draw from our bodhisattvic desires. The Pali language distinguishes between two kinds of desire. *Tanha* connotes the desire of craving, a grasping at something that we imagine will fortify and secure the self once it is gained. *Chanda* means the desire to *do* something. In order to accomplish anything, there has to be an element of wanting. An aspiration. On the Zen path we first have to sit, and inevitably that sitting arises from the desire to get something. But as we go on, the sitting – if it is done steadfastly, every day – begins to *refine* our motivation. As the years pass, our bodhisattvic nature gradually gets freed up, and we find ourselves more naturally reaching out to serve others.

You will be able to attain to this only after seven times piercing and eight times breaking through.

We can understand this statement in terms of successive realization experiences. There is what we call *kensho* – an initial awakening experience which is usually quite shallow. In many cases it's hardly fair to call it awakening. Sometimes it's referred to as "entering the first gate," a phrase, I think, which is less likely to lend itself to wrong impressions. This is a kind of a piercing. But then, no matter what we pierce or break through, there is always more to do, more to break through, more to see through.

This "seven times piercing and eight times breaking through" does not need to be seen in terms of awakening, but simply as practice for everyone. It's most obvious in sesshin; we run into some barrier, some trouble, and, if we persist, we get through it somehow. Then we go on, and we continue piercing and breaking through.

Let's read Hsueh-tou's (Setcho's) verse:

The enlightened man, master of one single thing,
Stretches at ease on his bed.
If, in a dream, the ancients said they were enlightened,
Let them emerge from the scented water, and I would spit at them!

We don't need to see this reference to "stretching at ease on his bed"

literally as lazing around (although I can't help but think of Chao-chou finding Nan-ch'uan lying on a sofa), but simply as being at ease with this wonderful world of the senses. In sesshin we limit our sense activity; we keep the eyes down and maintain silence.



This is because, until we reach a very advanced stage in our training, the senses have the downside of snagging us and turning the mind outward. But who can live all the time in silence with his or her eyes down? Clearly, we are all immersed in the sense world, and that does not need to be an obstacle. Through daily zazen we can move freely, seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, touching, and thinking, without being caught. When Nan-ch'uan was lying on his sofa, he was just lying. But for us, it's quite a challenge, and can only be done purely, presumably, after full awakening. "If in a dream the ancients said they were enlightened . . ." To announce that you are enlightened means that you're still not fully awake, that you're still in a dream. This is the dream of dualism, in this case of enlightenment and ignorance. Hseuh-tou says, "Let them emerge from the scented water and I would spit at them!" "Don't give me that 'enlightenment' nonsense. Who is without this enlightened nature? Who is not endowed with this absolutely sufficient, complete Mind? Why do you stain it with words like 'enlightenment'?"

When we can free ourselves from all such categories, then we can move through the world in a "samadhi of innocent delight"; we can fully live this life instead of going through it in a cloud of thoughts and discriminations.

There is a passage called "Joy" by a 17th-Century Chinese writer, Chin Sheng-t'an, that goes to the heart of this koan:

It is a hot day in June when the sun hangs still in the sky and there is not a whiff of wind or air, nor a trace of clouds; the front and back yards are hot like an oven and not a single bird dares to fly about. Perspiration lows down my whole body in little rivulets. There is the noon-day meal before me, but I cannot take it for the sheer heat. I ask for a mat to spread on the ground and lie down, but the mat is wet with moisture, and lies swarm about to rest on my nose and refuse to be driven away. Just at this moment when I am completely helpless, suddenly there is a rumbling of thunder and big sheets of black clouds overcast the sky and come majestically like a great army advancing to battle. Rain water begins to pour down from the eaves like a cataract. The perspiration stops. The clamminess of the ground is gone. All lies disappear to hide themselves and I can eat my rice. Ah, is this not happiness?

Having nothing to do after a meal, I go to the shops and take a fancy to a little thing. After bargaining for some time, we still haggle about a small difference, but the shop boy still refuses to sell it. Then I take out a little thing from my sleeve, which is worth about the same thing as the difference, and throw it at the boy. The boy suddenly smiles and bows courteously saying, "You're too generous." Ah, is this not happiness?

I have nothing to do after a meal, and try to go through the things in some old trunks. I see there are dozens or hundreds of I.O.U.'s from people who owe my family money. Some of them are dead and some still living, but in any case there is no hope of their returning the money. Behind people's backs I put them together in a pile and make a bonfire of them, and I look up to the sky and see the last trace of smoke disappear. Ah, is this not happiness?

It is a summer day. I go bareheaded and barefooted, holding a parasol to watch young people singing Soochow folk songs while treading the water wheel. The water comes up over the wheel in a gushing torrent like molten silver or melting snow. Ah, is this not happiness?

I wake up in the morning and seem to hear someone in the house sighing and saying that last night someone died. I immediately ask to find out who it is, and learn that it is the sharpest and most calculating fellow in town. Ah, is this not happiness?

To cut with a sharp knife a bright green watermelon on a big scarlet plate of a summer afternoon. Ah, is this not happiness?

A poor scholar comes to borrow money from me, but is shy about mentioning the topic, and so he allows the conversation to drift along on other topics. I see his uncomfortable situation, pull him aside to a place where we are alone and ask him how much he needs. Then I go inside and give him the sum, and having done this, I ask him, "Must

you go immediately to settle this matter or can you stay a while and have a drink with me?" Ah, is this not happiness?

To open the window and let a wasp out of the room. Ah, is this not happiness?

And now we will soon emerge from our sesshin. To step into the shower and wash your hair after seven days . . . To shave and feel your face change from bristly to smooth . . . To laugh with the person next to you at dinner over some little goof-up that occurred during sesshin. Ah, is this not happiness?