

BAIZHANG'S FOX

When Baizhang delivered a certain series of sermons, an old man always followed the monks to the main hall and listened to him. When the monks left the hall, the old man would also leave. One day, however, he remained behind, and Baizhang asked him, "Who are you, standing here before me?"

The old man replied, "I am not a human being. In the old days of Kashyapa Buddha, I was a head monk, living here on this mountain. One day a student asked me, 'Does a man of enlightenment fall under the yoke of causation or not?' I answered, 'No, he does not.' Since then I have been doomed to undergo five hundred rebirths as a fox. I beg you now to give the turning word to release me from my life as a fox. Tell me, does a man of enlightenment fall under the yoke of causation or not?"

Baizhang answered, "He does not ignore causation."

No sooner had the old man heard these words than he was enlightened.

Making his bows, he said, "I am emancipated from my life as a fox. I shall remain on this mountain.

I have a favor to ask of you: would you please bury my body as that of a dead monk."

Baizhang had the director of the monks strike with the gavel and inform everyone that after the midday meal there would be a funeral service for a dead monk.

The monks wondered at this, saying, "Everyone is in good health; nobody is in the sick ward. What does this mean?"

After the meal Baizhang led the monks to the foot of a rock on the far side of the mountain and with his staff poked out the dead body of a fox and performed the ceremony of cremation.

That evening he ascended the rostrum and told the monks the whole story.

Obaku thereupon asked him, "The old man gave the wrong answer and was doomed to be a fox for five hundred rebirths. Now, suppose he had given the right answer, what would have happened then?"

Baizhang said, "You come here to me, and I will tell you."

Obaku went up to Baizhang and boxed his ears.

Baizhang clapped his hands with a laugh and exclaimed, "I was thinking that the

barbarian had a red beard, but now I see before me the red-bearded barbarian himself."

Mumon's Comment

Not falling under causation: how could this make the monk a fox?

Not ignoring causation: how could this make the old man emancipated?

If you come to understand this, you will realize how old Baizhang would have enjoyed five hundred rebirths as a fox.

Mumon's Verse

Not falling, not ignoring:

Two faces of one die.

Not ignoring, not falling:

A thousand errors, a million mistakes.

Originally, 'koan' meant a public case which established a legal precedent. In Zen it is public exchange between a master and disciple that highlights a problem such as causality. A koan is a paradoxical story assigned to a student in order to help their awakening or to test the depth of their realization. That is, you will understand the koan only insofar as you understand yourself. Koan study in Soto Zen does not follow a formal syllabus like Rinzai Zen. Instead, a teacher will pick a particular koan from any number of collections to focus a student's practice on a particular problem that he feels is necessary for that student and that time.

Before we go into Baizhang's Fox, I'd like to say a few things about how I have learned to work with koans. The first step is to familiarize yourself with the story enough that you have memorized it. When I began my formal study of koans, I was not permitted to say anything about a koan until I could recite it from memory. I have noticed that when I recite a koan from memory, I have a distinct sensation in my chest—as I have learned it by heart. So the first step in practicing with a koan is to take it in as deeply and completely as you take in a breath. Let the images and turning phrases of the story penetrate your entire body. You will see that your discursive intellect will interfere with the digestion of the story by trying to make sense out of things. We need to let it try what it always tries to do without identifying with

it. Eventually, it just gives up from exhaustion. This is a wonderful thing to experience.

This is the second koan of the Mumonkan, following the famous *Mu* Koan, which asked the question, “Does a dog have Buddha nature.” By considering the question of whether or not an enlightened being is subject to the laws of causality, the koan opens up a dialectic between the two aspects of our lives: the relative and the absolute. We are ordinary, karmic beings, born as a result of various causes and conditions. We have likes and dislikes, talents and vulnerabilities, successes and failures, and so forth. And yet, each of us sitting here is a Buddha. Our problem as a human being is to reconcile these two aspects, peacefully and harmoniously.

The old man told his students that an enlightened being is not subject to the laws of causality and he was forced to endure 500 lives as a fox. Here, I should emphasize that a fox is a terrible creature in Japanese mythology. Not only is it wily and dishonest but he brings bad luck just like a black cat does in our folklore. There are many shrines dedicated to foxes that were built to ward off their evil spirits. So being reborn a fox over and over again is a very unfortunate karmic result.

But was the old man wrong in his reasoning? He only repeated the classical answer found in the sutras. A Buddha is not subject to karma—that is what makes him into a Buddha. But the question has no easy “yes” or “no” response. Let’s look at a few lines of verse commentary by Lingyuan included in the case.

Clearly saying “not subject,” when was the old man ever mistaken?

Pointedly saying “not blind,” how did Baizhang ever understand?

Non-understanding with non-mistaking together express subtle awareness.

Non-subjection and non-blindness distinctly represent the true state...

In the first line, Lingyuan is saying that while it is not possible to escape the objective laws of causality, it is possible to avoid specific causes. This is a very important point. It is true that everything has a cause—this is a fact that has been verified over and over again through the centuries. I am sure each of you has verified this for yourself. But the koan is saying that we need to distinguish between the necessary and the possible. We see that every result has a cause, but also need to see that the causes of

karma come from us. A spiritual practice, by giving us more and more control over these causes, allows us to live more and more freely with Karma. These causes come from our body, speech, and mind, and so we need to work on these three parts of our lives, simultaneously. The results of our actions are positive or negative or neutral. This is a fact of our lives; it is a fact of the universe. If you don't yet believe this to be true, you need to "check it out," as one of my Tibetan teachers used to say.

A line from the verse commentary of *Women* says "If you can set a single eye here, you will know how the former resident of the mountain gained five hundred lifetimes of grace." This is extraordinary. It is saying that it is up to *us* to reconcile the positions of Baizhang and the old man. Most important, it is saying that if you take the relative and the absolute as separate you will be *forced* to be reborn as a fox, but if you see that they are not separate, you will be freely reborn as a fox. Absolute and the relative can't be separated just as you cannot separate form from emptiness. Karma and no-karma are inextricably mixed. In the words of the Heart Sutra, *There is neither ignorance nor extinction of ignorance, and so forth, down to neither old age and death, nor extinction of old age and death.* No one in this world is beyond karmic consequences.

We are karmic beings and we need to learn what is good and what is bad and try to cultivate the good and let go of the bad. We do this by following the Bodhisattva precepts. But if we do something bad, we need to see its consequences so that we can learn to do better. Our practice is to see what happens without saying "it shouldn't have happened." Zen practice frees us to see exactly what is happening and helps us respond to it, wholeheartedly. When we accept what is as *what is* and make a wholehearted effort to accept what will come out of it, we are free— not from karma, but with karma. Then we are human and Buddha at one and the same time.

So while we may not be able to escape karma, we must pay careful attention to it as it plays out in each of the moments of our lives. In the words of the koan, an enlightened being does not ignore causality. This is the *turning phrase* of the koan. Such a phrase is an expression that can turn one to realization. Sometimes it is a offhand remark and sometimes it can be a presentation of the deepest truth.

In fascicle 90 of the *Shobogenzo*, Dogen says that "the most serious mistake made by those who study Zen in China is to believe that a person who practices completely

does not fall into cause and effect.” He says that to equate *not ignoring* with *not falling into* you make the gravest of mistakes. He concludes by saying “Even if you do nothing more than deny cause and effect, this is a disastrous, poisonous view. Immediately clarify all causes and all effects if you want to make the aspiration for enlightenment your top priority...”

Dogen says “After all, causation is self-evident; there are no exceptions.” At first we might conclude that not ignoring causation is true, and that rejecting causation is false. But we must not be too commonsensical about this. Most important, we must not become attached to either position. The problem is not so much the position, but our attachment to it. If you are attached to anything, even the truth, you are living in the delusion of duality. If there is no self or other, no subject or object, how can you believe in anything? Consider this poem:

“Not falling into causation.”

And he was turned into a fox—the first mistake.

“Not ignoring causation.”

And he was released from the fox body—the second mistake!

When one sees the non duality of both responses, when one transcends their seeming contradictoriness, then one is free to live life as it really is. We need to experience this dialectic from every conceivable point of view. Both can be true, both can be false, either one can be true. Zen is about including and transcending all these distinctions. Zen is free and active in another sphere where it makes use of both of these statements. When these distinctions are wiped away, we are free to live our life as an inextricable alchemical mixture of the absolute and the relative. We need to see that we are a Buddha and we are a sentient being. Everything else is just commentary!