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**The Question of Life and Death**

Dharma Discourse by John Daido Loori Roshi  
Koans of the Way of Reality, Case 67  
The Seven Wise Women

**Main Case**

When Master Guishan was studying under Baizhang, he worked as a tenzo at the monastery. Baizhang wanted to choose an abbot for Dayi Monastery. He told the head monk and all the rest of his disciples to make their Zen presentations, and the ablest one would be sent to found the monastery. Then Baizhang took a pitcher, placed it on the floor and asked the question: “This must not be called a pitcher. What do you call it?” The head monk said, “It cannot be called a wooden sandal.” Baizhang then asked Guishan. Guishan walked up, kicked over the pitcher, and left. Baizhang said, “The head monk has been defeated by Guishan.” So Guishan was ordered to start the monastery.

**Capping Verse**

*Mountains, rivers, and the Great Earth  
are not seen in a mirror.  
Reason exhausted ideas and opinions forgotten—  
what is it that remains for comparison?*

This story concerns seven wise women, sisters, who are supposed to have lived around the time of Shakyamuni. They were of noble birth, aristocrats, and as was customary among the wealthy, they were surrounded by servants who took care of them. All they needed to do—much like the Buddha before he became a wandering mendicant—was entertain themselves. They liked to go to parties and have fun. According to the story, one day the eldest of the women said, “Today, instead of going to a party, let’s go to the crematorium” or, “Let’s go to the Nirvana Forest.” And so they did.



When they got there, they saw a corpse. The eldest sister pointed to it and said, “The corpse is here, where has the person gone?” At that, all seven women are said to have experienced enlightenment and realized the Way. At that moment a shower of flowers came down from heaven, and a voice said, “Excellent, Excellent.” The eldest sister asked, “Who is praising us?” and the voice from the sky said, “I am Indra and because I have seen the sacred women realizing the Way, I came and scattered a rain of flowers.”

Indra is one of those deities borrowed from Hinduism. He was integrated into Buddhism as a guardian of the dharma, and we know him primarily in relation to Indra’s Net; we also find him in the Avatamsaka Sutra. As this exchange with seven women unfolds, Indra tells the women he will give them anything they want. The eldest sister, who was pretty incredible, asked for three things: a rootless tree, a piece of land with no north and south, and an echoless valley.

This is where we get to the heart of the koan, and this is a classic Mahayana koan. The whole scene takes place in Nirvana Forest, a burial ground, which is a natural place to confront the question of life and death. Now, we should understand right from the beginning that the question of life and death is the question of duality. It’s the question of separation, of this and that. It has to do with the way we perceive ourselves and the universe, and at the heart of this duality lies the root cause of pain and suffering.

The seven wise women confront the matter of life and death with a question: “The corpse is here, but where has the person gone?” The koan says that at that moment, all seven women awakened to the truth and entered the way. What does it mean to awaken to the truth? What does it tell us about our lives or the universe? What does it mean to “enter the Way”? The Way is not a narrow trail through the woods; it reaches everywhere. Since the Way reaches everywhere to begin with, how can we speak about entering it? The commentary goes on to say, “But say, if the corpse is there, where would the person have gone?” So we need to ask ourselves, what is the corpse and what is the person? We need to ask ourselves, “Who am I?”

If any of you have ever experienced someone passing from this life, you can probably appreciate the question of “where does the person go?” When someone is on the verge of death, there are the moments before they pass, when they are so-called “alive” and all the instruments measuring heartbeat and so on indicate they’re alive—and then there are the moments following, when they’ve “died.” The person doesn’t look any different. Yet at that moment, the person is not there; the corpse is there, but the person is not there. The corpse is the bag of skin; the thing that encapsulates what we think is our self. Is that who you are? A bag of skin?

The bag of skin is impermanent. It’s in a constant state of becoming, a constant state of change. Who you are now and who you were five years ago are not the same—physically, psychologically, spiritually. We’re always changing. Think of yourself at five years of age, at five months of age, at ninety years of age. We don’t look the same, we don’t act the same, we don’t feel the same. We’re constantly changing. So what is the self? What is the person? Who are you? Usually when we’re confronted by the question “Who are you?” we go right to the aggregates—my thoughts, my feelings, my history, my ideas. These are the physical and mental elements Buddhism calls the skandhas: conception, volition, consciousness, material sensation—but is that who we are?

What is the self? What is it that’s born and what is it that dies? Is the thing that’s born and the thing that dies the same or different? Life and death: are they the same or are they different? The question that the eldest woman asks, “The corpse is here, where has the person gone?” is a very profound question. It’s not limited to just living and dying—it’s about the whole universe, past, present, and future.

The three requests of the eldest sister are indeed extraordinary. They go right to the heart of the buddhadharma, right to the heart of this koan. Only someone who has resolved this question of life and death would be able to make such a request, let alone see into it.

Master Dogen said, “The great shravakas do not know the meaning of the Tathagata’s unsurpassed bodhi.” The shravakas are the disciples of the Buddha that focus on personal rather than universal enlightenment, so they’re not bodhisattvas. Only the bodhisattvas, who are not involved in calculations, gain advantage and let go of advantage. Calculations have to do with goals, and when the goals are gone, there may be gain but there’s no awareness of that gain. The gain is just letting go of the goals. So there is no holding on to that gain. There’s no awareness of that gain. There’s no awareness of any kind of advantage or non-advantage. The bodhisattva just responds to circumstances as they arrive.

Then the next line says, “Do you understand what he is saying?” In order to understand what he is saying we need to look at what’s right here, right now. When I say look at right here, right now, I mean you look at what’s right here, right now in your life. Not collectively, not abstractly, not intellectually, but practically: what’s on your plate, under your nose and how do you work with that?

The commentary continues, “Be that as it may, if you want to understand the rootless tree, you first need to understand rootlessness itself.” Rootless means the roots are gone: they’re either cut off or undeveloped. Or when it’s used in terms of people, rootless means that they’ve no close ties—no connections. Well, what kind of a thing has no connections to anything? Is that what the dharma is about?

Dogen says, “Do you want a rootless tree? The cypress tree in the garden is it. If you cannot use that, raise up the staff and see that this is exactly it.” All dharmas are nothing but rootless. How is that? Each dharma fills the universe. Where would the roots go? There’s nothing outside of it.

All dharmas are nothing but rootless. They’re not connected to anything but contain everything. Do you understand? Do you understand—not in your head, because it’s easy enough to understand intellectually, but do you understand in your body? In dokusan, when I ask people a question on a koan and they hesitate, I ring the bell. When you hesitate, then you’re thinking. If you’ve embodied it, you instantly respond. There’s no reflection—it’s immediate because you’re the embodiment of it. If I ask you where your nose is, you just immediately point to it; you know where your nose is. Well, it’s the same with those test questions

All dharmas are nothing but rootless. This is the cypress tree in the garden. It’s this stick; it’s this hand. The cypress tree in the garden is a reference to a koan in which a monk asks Chaochou, “What’s the meaning of the ancestor coming from the West?” and Chaochou says, “The cypress tree in the garden.” The monk responds, “Master, please don’t teach using an object.” Chaochou says, “I’m not showing it to you in an object.” The monk again says, “What’s the meaning of the ancestor coming from the West?” Chaochou says, “The cypress tree in the garden.” The commentary to this koan says, “Chaochou’s Zen cuts off the myriad streams and stuns the mind. There is no place to take hold of it. This cypress tree is not to be found in the world of phenomena, nor can it be found in the realm of emptiness. Then where shall we search for it? Putting aside the cypress tree, I ask you what is the meaning of the ancestor coming from the West? If you can clearly see into the monastic’s question, you will clearly see through Chaochou’s response. If you think there’s any meaning whatsoever, then you won’t even be able to save yourself. If you say there’s no meaning, you’re still a hundred miles from the truth. What would you say?”

What is it that delineates boundaries? The rootless tree fills the universe. The dharmas are rootless; the dharmas fill the universe. That being the case, where do all of these boundaries come from? Where do I end and you begin? What creates these edges? It’s got to do with your mind and how you use it, how you see yourself and how you see the universe.

“The piece of land without north and south” is not a piece of anything. The literal Chinese characters for north and south are the same as yin and yang or shadow and light, but whenever they’re used in reference to land, they refer to north and south. To even say “a piece of land” mistakes it—it’s a continuum, a seamless continuum. It’s the ten directions itself. The ten directions include everything: the eight points of the compass and the zenith and nadir. Dogen says, “It’s the Nirvana Forest. If you can’t use that, use the entire world in the ten directions.” Why would he say such a thing? What’s the relationship between the Nirvana Forest, a place where corpses are buried, and the ten directions? What’s the connection? Is the connection everywhere?

It’s kind of interesting when you look at the human body: we’re in equilibrium with the universe. We’re constantly taking in life and we’re constantly producing waste, constantly taking in and giving out. The amount of giving out that we do amounts to about 16 tons every 30 years. That’s a lot of whatever. And then there’s 16 tons of life that comes in, that’s turned into fingernails, hair, everything. I ask myself the question all the time, Who am I really? The 16 tons of waste I’ve produced, the 16 tons of food I’ve yet to consume, or the 170 pounds that’s being held together by this bag of skin? Who’s the real Daido Roshi? And what happens when we die? There’s no more food coming in, but we’re still combining with the universe—whether we do it fast by cremation or allow it to happen slowly by decay and decomposition, or feed it to the crows and the vultures like the Tibetans do. In any case, our body becomes dispersed throughout the universe. Kind of beautiful, don’t you think?

So where’s the self in all this? Did the self suddenly jump into the body when it was born? Or when an embryo was formed? Or at the time of conception? What’s the relationship between the Nirvana Forest and the ten directions? What makes the echoless valley echoless? What makes an echo? Dogen said, “Do you want an echoless valley? I shout ‘Sisters’ to all seven of you. If you respond, I immediately say, ‘I’ve given you an echoless valley.’ If you do not respond, I say, ‘after all it doesn’t echo.’ ”

What is he saying? In order for there to be rootlessness, echolessness, the seamless continuum of north and south, no Yin and Yang, there needs to be identity, intimacy. Understand that an echoless valley is not a valley at all. There’s no walls, no canyon, no container, no delineations to establish boundaries. There are no surfaces to reflect off of, no sound to begin with. So I ask you, what is soundlessness? Thoreau once said, “I hear beyond the range of sound, I see beyond the verge of sight.” How is that? How is it to go beyond the range of sound and sight? Again— intimacy.



The commentary goes on to say, “If you wish to get to the bottom of all this, then go to the original question of the elder sister.” That is, go to the question of life and death. The corpse is here, where has the person gone? What is it that’s born and what is it that dies? In birth, not a single atom is added. In death, not a particle is lost. Where do you find yourself? Who are you? This person is dead. Where did he go?

Life, death, coming, going, existing, not existing, realization, no realization, enlightenment, delusion, good, bad, right, wrong: we always see things dualistically. How do you see it as one thing? If you go to either side of a duality, you miss it. If you try to say that neither side exists, that’s nihilistic. If you say both sides exist, that doesn’t reach it. It’s not form. It’s not emptiness. It’s not both and it’s not neither. Something else needs to be seen.

This person is dead. Where did he go? We should also ask ourselves, we are alive, but where are we? Are we alive to the moment or are we alive to yesterday? Do we live in what’s in front of us, or do we live in tomorrow, in what hasn’t happened yet? How do we spend these precious moments that we call life? Do we use it, or are we used by it? How do we combust ourselves? Is it in a self-centered way, or for the benefit of all beings, sentient and insentient alike? How do we understand our life? All of that is embodied in the eldest sister’s question, “The corpse is here, but where has the person gone?” What is the person? Well, you’re the person. Where were you before you were born? Were you anywhere? Where will you be after you’re dead? Will you be anywhere?

The capping verse: “Mountains, rivers, and the great earth, are not seen in a mirror.” When you see things in a mirror you see a reflection. In intimacy there’s no such reflection—it’s not about two things.

“Reason exhausted, ideas and opinions forgotten, then what is it that remains for comparison once the mind stops moving?” Reason exhausted, ideas and opinions forgotten, is not just an idea, and it’s not something that’s going to happen by itself. It’s not going to happen just because you became a Zen student. It’s not going to happen because you’ve received Jukai, or come to sesshin. Or even because you understand what it is that I’m saying. It’s not going to happen until it’s in your body as well as your mind, and to get it there you’re going to have to work on it. It’s probably the most important thing any of us can do with our lives. The question of life and death is no small thing. Please take care of it.