

## Understanding Is Not Enough

The Blue Cliff Record, Case 7, Wei Jao Asks about Buddha

### Pat George: Dharma Talk February 21, 2009

Today's koan is one of several that start with the question, "What is Buddha?" There are various answers to this question. This current case presents one possibility.

The koan:

A monk asked Fa-yen, "What is Buddha?"  
( Fa-yen is known in Japan as Hogen.)  
Fa-yen said, "You are Wei Jao.

That's the whole koan.

"Wei-jao is the monk who is asking." It's as though Monica asked, "What is Buddha?" and I answered "You are Monica."

We first need to parse out the question to see what the monk is getting at, where he's coming from, and what his state of mind is when he asks.

When you think about it, it's a dumb question for a Zen student to ask. This monk surely knows Buddha's biography. So he's not looking for a recounting of the Buddha's life. He must also know the teachings to some extent so he's not looking for a rundown of the teachings. Not only does he know this basic information but he probably has some idea of the broader meaning of *buddha*. For example, we say that we all have Buddha Nature, and that is something different than the historical Buddha. So the monk certainly has much information and experience with Buddha and with Buddhism.

We can't be sure exactly what's on his mind when he asks this question. There isn't any background given about the monk in this case. Some cases give us lead-in information about the participants or some times the same characters appear in different cases which help us fill in information about them. But this koan doesn't have any of that. No background here. No biography. No appearance in another koan. This is an anonymous monk.

At any rate it doesn't look like he was simply asking about the historical Buddha. He said "*What?*" not "*Who.*" This is kind of interesting. "*What* is

Buddha?” not “*Who* is Buddha?”

The question seems more like the questions in the *Bible*, when people asked about Jesus: “What manner of man is this?” The questioner implying, “We haven’t ever met anyone like this before. What’s the meaning of this person” The question in the koan seems more that kind of question. Deeper.

What manner of person is Buddha? Who is this person? Is he a god? Is he a supernatural being? Is he a saint? Is he a guru? Maybe he’s just a charlatan; there are plenty of spiritual charlatans around. Maybe he’s just a simple human being, but if so, what’s his importance?

The monk might also be asking, not so much about the person of Buddha, but about the teachings. Not what the teachings are, because he no doubt knows that, but asking what is the crux of it all. What’s the essence of Buddhism?

Or, he could be asking something broader. He might be asking: What is the irreducible reality of human life? What is the nature of the spiritual self? Is there some separate aspect of a person that is the spiritual part? What is Buddha Nature?

He could be asking about practice. What’s the last word of practice? There’s a famous koan where an elderly teacher toddled down to the dining room of the monastery because he thought he heard the bell for the meal—for oryoki. He comes in carrying his bowls. And all the monks start making fun of him because it isn’t time to eat. They say, “What are you doing here? The bell didn’t ring. Blah, blah, blah.” He just takes his bowls and toddles out again. He doesn’t defend himself or offer any explanation. And the monks are all saying, “Oh, boy, the old guy is really losing it. He’s so old he’s getting forgetful. Maybe he’s got dementia, who knows?” And one of the monks says, “It’s too bad that the ancient revered teacher does not yet know the last word of Zen.” So the next day when he shows up on time for the meal, one monk says, “Ah! He’s finally got the last word of Zen.” One of the questions our koan today also poses is: What is the last word of Zen?

So maybe this monk is asking something similar. What’s the last word of Zen? We all want to know that, right? We think if we just knew that, we’d have everything we need. We think the last word must be something secret and hard to understand. Wei-jao may be asking a question on this level, “How should I practice?” “What is enlightenment?” “How do I ‘get it’?” “Where is this enlightenment that I’m after, and how will I know when I’ve got it?”

All of these questions might be possible concerns which the monk is trying to

form into a question. We can't really be sure just what's on his mind. But one thing to discern when a student asks a question in a koan is this, "Is it a sincere question?" Because a lot of times when a student is approaching the master with a question, the student is testing. This often occurs when the student is a traveling monk; a monk traveling on a pilgrimage often visits a master at his monastery or temple, and wants to know: Okay, what does this guy know? The student may then ask the teacher a testing question. Sometimes that's what is going on. And sometimes a question is a challenge—the questioner is trying to put down the master. Defeat him in dharma combat.

For example, we discussed a koan recently where a student comes and says to Joshu who lives in a town with a famous bridge, "I heard about this historical, wonderful bridge, and now that I get here all I see is a wooden log across the stream." That's really putting the master down. It is not a question the student really wants an answer to. He thinks he has already plumbed Joshu's wisdom.

So we need to know what kind of question the monk in our koan is asking. In this case, it does seem like a sincere question. The student is asking for real, not trying to test or insult the master. Like many sincere Zen questions, it is probably a cry for help. "What is Buddha? Tell me, I need some answers here. Help. What should I do?"

The teacher comes right back with an answer. In the commentary about the koan this question and answer are described by the phrase that we chant in *The Identity of Relative and Absolute*,—"like two arrows meeting in mid-air." The teacher's answer and the student's question are the "two arrows." The student asks, immediately, the teacher shoots back an answer. And the answer meets the student's question pointedly.

At first glance the teacher's reply might not seem pointed. It sounds like he's answering some other question. The monk asks about Buddha, and the teacher tells him his own name. It seems kind of illogical. It seems as though Fa-yen might be avoiding the question, though it's really a very exact answer.

What does the answer point to? Perhaps Fa-yen means something like this: You are the Buddha. There is no difference between you and Buddha. Maybe he's nudging the monk and asking, Why are you looking outside yourself for answers? Don't do that. There is a Zen saying, "Riding an ox to search for an ox." Fa-yen's answer is similar, saying, "Why are you looking for something that you've already got?"

Maybe Fa-yen is pointing the student to the place where he will find all the answers he's looking for. Everything he needs is right there within himself. Maybe he's trying to turn the student away from looking outward and get him to look at the ongoing flow of his own living experience. The monk himself sits at the place where any truth or reality he's going to find will be. And so do we; we sit directly in the midst of our own lives.

Maybe Fa-yen wants the student to remember that there's not some kind of spiritual realm where we find spiritual answers. The spiritual answers that we find always flow from our lives. Where else would they come from? We're always trying to find them somewhere else, but that's very tricky, because there isn't anywhere else. There is no other realm. No other reality. All we have is our own lives and our own experience. So anything we're going to realize, we're going to realize there.

Again, we're not exactly sure what Fa-yen had in mind. But surely the meaning of the koan lies somewhere in these possibilities. Somewhere in these guesses at what's on the minds of the two people involved.

In some ways, this is not only a short koan, it's also a simple koan to understand. Everybody can get it. So now that you've got it, and are feeling very smug, I'm going to tell you another story included in the commentary for this koan.

The story is preceded by this comment:

"If you want to see the words of Fa-yen, you must be a fellow who doesn't turn his head when struck. A fellow with teeth like swords and a mouth like a bowl of blood. Who knows outside the words, what they refer to. Then you will have a small portion of realization. If one by one they make intellectual interpretations, everyone on earth would be an exterminator of the Buddha race. As for this Zen traveler [the monk in the story] he was constantly engrossed in penetrating investigation. Therefore under the impact of one word, it was as if the bottom fell out of his bucket." [The "bottom fell out of the bucket" is a Zen metaphor for enlightenment.]

Okay, here's the other story. It involves the same teacher, different questioner:

Superintendent Ze, who had been staying in Fa-yen's congregation had never entered Fa-yen's room for interview. One day, Fa-yen asked him, "Why haven't you come to my room?"

Ze replied, "Didn't you know, teacher. When I was at Jing-ling's place, I had an entry, an insight?"

Fa-yen said, "Try to recall it for me."

Ze said, "I asked 'What is Buddha?'. The teacher said 'The fire god comes looking for fire.' "

Fa-yen said, "Ah, good words. But I'm afraid you've misunderstood them. Can you say something more for me?"

Ze said, "The fire god is in the province of fire. He is seeking fire with fire. Likewise I am Buddha, yet I am searching for Buddha."

Fa-yen said, "Sure enough, you have misunderstood."

Containing his anger [because his explanation was rejected], Ze left the monastery and went off across the river. Fa-yen said, "This man can be saved if he comes back. If he doesn't return, he can't be saved."

Out on the road, Ze thought to himself, "He's the teacher of five-hundred people. How could he deceive me?" So he turned back, and again called on Fa-yen. [He let go of his ego and pride and let go of his idea about being right.]

He called on Fa-yen again and Fa-yen said, "Just ask me. Ask me again, and I'll answer you."

Thereupon Ze asked, "What is Buddha?"

Fa-yen said, "The fire god comes looking for fire." At these words, Ze was greatly enlightened.

There you go! That's the story.

This koan is almost precisely the same as the one we started with. And the explanation the student offered is almost exactly the same as the explanation I gave you for the first koan.

So what's the point of the story? Why does the teacher say he has misunderstood? Why does the student become enlightened when he hears his own answer quoted back to him a little later? Indeed the answer which enlightens him is the same answer which Fa-yen told the monk indicated that he had misunderstood the koan.

The story is making a subtle point. What it's pointing to is that the answer to a koan—the point of a koan—doesn't lie in understanding it, in being able to explain it. Ze was quite correct in explaining what his teacher was pointing at. He *understood* the koan. But the true answer to a koan lies in realizing it. Realizing it means embodying it. Incorporating it into your life. Living it.

So if you understand a koan, you need to ask yourself: Do I really realize it?

In the case of this koan: Do you really believe you're Buddha? If so, what does that mean? If so, how does it change the way you live your life? How does it change the way you practice? How does it change the way you treat others? What does it mean about where you look for answers?

A true Zen understanding is that not until a koan is being lived, have you solved it. It's not solved when you just understand. When you're living *this* koan, then you "know outside the words what they refer to" as the commentary of the koan says." Then you really are Buddha. Then you really are the fire god.