

Baling Haojian's Three Turning Words I
Joan Sutherland, Roshi
Cerro Gordo Temple ~ Santa Fe, NM
January 3, 2008

Good evening, everyone.

I'm really happy that joining us tonight is Sarah Bender, Sensei, who is the Open Source teacher for Springs Mountain Sangha. It's a delight to have her here. The Springs Mountain Sangha is about twelve or thirteen years old and we've worked together for most of that time. It's a great thriving community of wonderful people. They often come down here for retreats and people go up there for retreats, so I love having that cousin.

I want to enter the New Year in the company of a series of koans that are called Baling Haojian's Three Turning Words. Baling Haojian is one of the old Chinese teachers. We don't know a lot about him. He was alive in the tenth century and was one of Yunmen's dharma successors. Yunmen is one of the greatest of the old Chinese teachers.

A turning word is something someone says which has the power to cause an epiphany or an awakening in somebody else. These koans have that power and are known for it. There's something in them that lays a foundation for what we're doing in this meditation and practice. It seemed like a good place to start a new year.

We don't know a lot about Baling. One thing we know is that when he was Yunmen's student he had a nickname, Mouthy. Depending on the commentator, that was either because of his eloquence or his wind-bagginess. It's unclear. Yunmen would ask questions that were quite common for teachers to ask of their students in those days. Baling gave these three answers to three of Yunmen's questions, and they were so powerful that they've come down to us a thousand years later.

They go like this : The first very simple question is, "What is Zen?" What is this school of ours? What are we doing, and also, what is the insight? What is the thing that we can come to understand in this way? Baling replied, "Snow in a silver bowl." So that's the first turning word : snow in a silver bowl.

The second question Yunmen asked him is also seemingly simple but very important : "What is the Way?" How do you do it? How do we do it? How do we live? And Baling said, "The clear-sighted person falls into a well." That's intriguing, don't you think? What's that about?

The third exchange between Yunmen and Baling went like this : “What is the sword so sharp that it would cut a single hair blown against it?” So that’s already an interesting image. Baling responded with one of the most beautiful phrases in the koan literature, “Each branch of coral holds up the light of the moon.”

The first turning phrase, “What is Zen? Snow in a silver bowl,” is saying something about what it is we realize in Zen. The second one, “What is the Way? The clear-sighted person falls into a well,” is saying something about how we go about realizing it. The third, “What is that sword so sharp that it would cut a single hair blown against it? Each branch of coral holds up the light of the moon,” says something about what the world looks like when we have realized what is inherent in the first two of those questions and answers.

I want to spend a few talks on that; we’ll start tonight and see how far we go. We’ll keep coming back to these things, and if they seem mysterious and opaque at the moment, that’s fine. Let’s see what happens over the next couple of weeks and if there’s a way they can open up. If there’s anything that lights up for you, that got your attention in any of those phrases, even if you don’t understand why, take it with you, spend time with it, bring it into your meditation, and notice what happens when you do.

As was the custom, Yunmen liked Baling’s answers and said, *Okay, you go off and be a teacher.* Then he said a touching thing. It was the custom to have a memorial service after your teacher died, every year on the anniversary of your teacher’s death. It would be a big deal. There would be the bringing in of portraits that were kept hidden the rest of the year, offerings, sutras sung, and feasts. Yunmen said, “If, on the anniversary of my death, all you do is restate these three turning words, that would be my legacy, that’s all you have to do.” And indeed, that is all that Baling did every year on the anniversary of Yunmen’s death.

Let’s begin with the first one : “What is Zen? Snow in a silver bowl.” I would be interested if anybody wants to say right off the top of their heads what that image feels like to you. Not what you think it means, but what does it feel like to you?

Q1 : Cold.

Q2 : Purity.

Q3 : Bright.

JIS : Bright, cold, pure : we're beginning to get a constellation of qualities here. There's a contrast, isn't there, between that silver bowl which seems eternal, and that snow melting, as we speak, inside of it. That's important. Here you have this thing that is transitory held in this thing which seems quite solid and eternal. And they're both shining with the same light; they both shine with the same kind of purity. So this is something about form and emptiness. One of the things the old Chinese teachers were trying to do was to take that abstract sense of "Form is emptiness, emptiness is form," and bring it in in a way that we could begin to feel it and begin to understand, not abstractly, but intimately.

They had an advantage. When they saw the sentence "Form is emptiness, emptiness is form" in Chinese, the two characters for form and emptiness had second meanings that would be immediately obvious to a Chinese person. Form also means color, and emptiness is also a character used for the sky. So make that substitution. The color of the sky is the sky, the sky is the color of the sky. That is so much more intimate, isn't it? How could you ever divide the sky and the color of the sky? That's form and emptiness. That intimate, that dissolved into each other, that inseparable.

They were interested in images that give a felt sense of the union of those two things, of the indissolubility of them, rather than thinking of them as dualities that get mixed up somehow. Snow in a silver bowl is one such image. White heron hidden in the moonlight is another one. This is a moonlight so bright that you can't really make out the outline of the heron. Reeds that have white blossoms on them. White-flowering reeds covered in snow. They lose their individual shape and they become a mass of snow. White heron in the mist. White horse in the mist. White horse among the white reeds. All of those things. You get the feeling of what they were trying to do.

Let's stay for a moment with white heron in the mist as an image. There's that sense of not being able to pick out the place where heron stops and mist begins, or mist stops and heron begins, whichever way we look at it. Then imagine that the heron is lifting its wings. So the wings lift and the mist lifts. Everything lifts together. There's no way to separate those things out.

There's something tremendously important here. This is the answer to the question, "What is Zen?" Zen is the felt experience of a white heron's wings rising in the mist and being unable to tell what is mist and what is wing, and to have the whole thing move together as a unity.

We've moved from the duality of form and emptiness to a sense that form and emptiness are just aspects of everything. Everything has a formal aspect, and everything has an empty aspect. Then we move even a step more intimate, which is that form and emptiness have absolutely nothing to do with the nature of things. They have everything to do with our perception of them. We make form and

emptiness by the way we see things, by the way we think about things. If that's true, that's interesting, because we can change that. [Laughs] We can mess with how we see things. We can see things from different perspectives; we can change and shift the way we see.

Some of us were working a while ago with a koan that says, "When my mind does not arise, everything is blameless." Now that's the perspective of emptiness, right? When my discriminating mind, the mind of form, isn't there, there's no such thing as right and wrong, good and bad. Everything is blameless. We can shift into that perspective. When we were working with that koan a number of people told stories about moments when suddenly their mind hadn't arisen, and everything, for a little while, was blameless, and what that was like.

The old Chinese teachers used to say that it's fundamental to understand how it's your mind which makes form and emptiness, and to understand how it's possible to change that. Which doesn't mean to get rid of anything or substitute one thing for another, but to realize that both things really are completely interpenetrated, like the sky and the color of the sky, and to begin to see things in that way.

There was a famous poem by Shitou Xiqian a couple of generations before Baling's Three Turning Words that influenced him a lot. In it Shitou talks about the bright and the dark. For him, the dark is the origin of all things; the dark is the great mysterious, what we would call emptiness or the vastness. Everything that is, everything that has existence, is streams of light that come out of that darkness. But they're not separate from it : the streams of light are exactly that dark origin. He said we divide things up into the bright and the dark. For him, the bright was the daylight world, the world where we make bright distinctions between things, where it's this and not that, and this and that other thing, and I feel this about that, and I like this and I don't like that. He said that when all of that falls into the dark, everything is one, everything is the same, those bright distinctions go away.

He says that when you're standing in the bright the dark is present, but don't look only with the eyes of the dark. That is to say, when you're standing in the ordinary daylight world, it's not enough to say that it's all empty. That's not realistic or true. That dismissal of the facts and the truth of the bright is not real. By the same token, we're always standing in the dark, and the bright is present in the dark. So when we're in the dark, don't look only with the eyes of the bright. We're always in the vastness. But if we look only with the eyes of the bright, then we're making distinctions and we're thinking they're the important things.

There's an old Chippewa song that says this the best to me : "Often I go about crying and

complaining, and all the while I am being carried across the sky on a great wind.” We get caught in our crying and complaining and the various small bright view of things, and meanwhile we are standing in the dark, we are being carried across the sky on a great wind. He wasn’t saying that one viewpoint is better than another, he was saying both viewpoints are essential. And if we include both viewpoints all the time, if we get used to that, if that becomes our habit, our question, then after a while finally it’s not two viewpoints being combined anymore. It’s more like foreground and background. At any given moment, the world of form is more of the foreground and the vastness is in the background, but it can flip in an instant. When we sit, sometimes the vastness is in the foreground, and the world of form has gone into the background.

Have you ever had that experience of being out on a hike and you’re hiking up the hill, reviewing some extremely irritating thing in your life, mulling something over, perseverating about something. And you get to an outlook, look out at an incredible view, and just [Claps] instantly, foreground and background trade places. All of that collapses as if it never existed, and there is only the bigness of what you’re seeing. So that’s the next step — when it’s foreground and background, and we can feel them changing places and feel them moving in and out of each other. Then, eventually, there isn’t even that much movement anymore. There’s the one ground that contains all of that.

I’ll stop here for tonight. As I said, I’m going to keep talking about this in the weeks to come, so if it’s feeling a little general we’ll get into more of the specifics as we go along.

Thank you. Have a great week.