

Baling Haojian's Three Turning Words II : Falls Into a Well
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I've been talking for the last couple of weeks about a series of koans called Baling Haojian's Three Turning Words. I was speaking about "What is Zen? Snow in a silver bowl." The second of the three questions and responses are, "What is the Way? The clear-sighted person falls into a well." The third is : "What is the sword so sharp that it will cut a single hair blown against it?" The answer to that one is : "Each branch of coral holds up the light of the moon."

I want to say one last thing about snow in a silver bowl as a way of entering "What is the way? The clearly enlightened person falls into a well." Whatever your visceral reaction to the image of snow in a silver bowl, it is *vivid*, it captures your imagination. From what I can tell, most people don't have a wide angle on it. You don't think that there's a bowl sitting on a table and there's some people around, you focus in on that simple image of snow in a silver bowl.

Sometimes we have a visceral reaction to a koan. Some people feel about snow in a silver bowl that it's cold, it's chilly, and they are repelled by that feeling of chilliness. Koans aren't supposed to transport you into a state of ecstasy or a wonderful world where everything is perfect. Sometimes they will work by raising a delusion, so that you become aware of it, and then it offers you the antidote to that delusion. I think that is one of the ways snow in a silver bowl can work. If you have a reaction of "Eew! It's cold!" and you stay with that, what's happened is you are no longer in a relationship to the koan, you are in a relationship to your reaction to the koan, and that's the end of the conversation. It's just the smallest turn from the bowl to "Eew! It's cold!", but the possibility of a relationship with the koan is over if you then make that small adjustment and stay with it.

So the koan wonders about the possibility of looking at it, imagining it, and thinking, *Oh, it's cold*. Can you feel the difference between *Oh, it's cold* and *Eew, it's cold*? It's a completely different thing, and we can feel that a life lived from the position of *Oh, it's cold* is going to be a different life than the life lived from the position of *Eew, it's cold*.

One of the things that happens with *Oh, it's cold* is that you don't have to love the cold, but it allows you to stay in relationship to the koan itself, to the image itself, and not move off to the

conversation with yourself about your own reaction. Maybe something can change if you stay in relationship with the koan. Maybe that relationship can develop a warmth that makes the coolness of the image not so important anymore, because it too can be part of a relationship that is warm.

The technical term for taking each thing as vivid and particular and having your whole attention is *tathagata*. Tathagata is one of the names of the Buddha. It's just *thusiness*. Something arises and it fills the screen and you are really in connection with it; and it is vivid for you and particular.

That takes us to the second koan, "What is the way? The clear-sighted person falls into a well." What I mean by that is, life offers us many things, and one of the things it offers us repeatedly is wells. Suddenly the earth opens up in front of us and we are invited to fall into something dark that we don't know the bottom of, we can't control, and we don't know what's going to happen. That's tathagata, if we accept the invitation : if a well is what presents itself, the Way is that you step into a well. If a mountain presents itself, the Way is that you climb the mountain.

I want to spend some time unpacking the idea that wells are bound to appear. And when they do, what about the possibility of just taking that next step into them? In the software world, when you complain to a software engineer about the way Microsoft Word is a completely impossible, bloated, stupid program, or Photoshop does these things that you can't possibly predict or control, the software engineer will say, "Oh that's a feature, not a bug of Microsoft Word or Photoshop." That's a feature of the program; it's not a problem with the program.

Anybody who has done construction or remodeling on their house knows that a feature of construction or remodeling is that it will take twice as long as you thought and will cost twice as much. That's a feature, not a bug. So wells are features, not bugs, of life. They're not mistakes, detours, obstacles, or problems. They're life itself.

They come in different ways. One of the ways to understand "The clear-sighted person falls into a well" is that no matter how clear-sighted you are, you're going to make mistakes. That's pretty simple and obvious. Sometimes we fall into a well because we've made a whopper of a mistake. Sometimes they surprise you and you can't see them until it's too late and your foot's

already out over the abyss, and you hadn't seen it ahead of time. They catch us by surprise. And sometimes we really do choose on purpose to take that step into the well. The koan literature is full of images like that : "Step from the top of the hundred foot pole." "Fall off the cliff with open hands." Which is quite lovely if you think about it. Not only do you have to fall off the cliff, but what would it be to do that with your hands open?

I want to come back to that falling, because however you got there, once you're falling it's pretty much the same. No matter what led up to it, falling is falling. Before I come back to that, I want to say a word about that moment at the lip of the well. It turns out, I think, that many of us spend a lot of time at the lip of the well, looking in, wondering about it, dropping stones to see how deep it is, walking around it to see if there is any other option. Wondering, stopping, not doing it, bargaining, negotiating, and trying to figure out ways to somehow make it easier or better or less risky to fall into the well. That's a pretty understandable human response. It *is* risky; there's no question about that. It's always risky when we take that step in the dark.

The question I'm wondering about is whether that risk is any more difficult, challenging, or painful than what it feels like to never jump; what it feels like to remain forever at the lip of the well looking in? That has its own pain, difficulty, and sorrow. I don't think it's a matter of choosing safety versus risk. It's more a matter of choosing your difficulty, choosing your problem, choosing, maybe, your sorrow.

Another thing we can sometimes think is, *Oh, wait, I'm not ready. I've got to get better, smarter, wiser, more compassionate. I've got to get my life together. I have to learn to rappel. There's something more I can do to make the outcome be a better outcome.* But the well has appeared, the well is already there. I wonder about the question of blessing your life just the way it is. If the well is here, I bless my life as it is with all its shortcomings, loose ends, and unresolved things. And I'm willing to take all of that into the well. I'm not putting off the leap, because there is always some way I could be perfecting myself a little bit more.

Then we fall. We've been talking about this, so far, as a personal thing in each of us as individuals in our own lives. But it can seem that we are falling, all of us, from one end of the universe to the other. And for a while we are falling together through this part of the universe. And this part of the universe is made up of earth, air, fire, water, difficulty, sorrow, tremendous beauty, poignancy, and all of that. We have a choice. We can accept the invitation that is

offered by this part of the universe that we are falling through, or we can refuse it. It's possible that not all of the universe is like this.

These days we don't even know if our laws of physics apply to all of the universe. It may well be that it's quite different out there in other galaxies, on other planets. Maybe it would be ecstatic to be a molecule in one of those vast interstellar clouds of gas, to be surfing the currents of the universe. An astronomer recently said that when those great clouds of gas bump into each other, they make a sound like chiming. So maybe it's like that.

We sure know that this world isn't all ecstasy and chiming. But if we say, as we fall through this part of the universe, *Okay, I'll take the sunsets, but keep your diseases*, we're refusing part of the offer; we're refusing part of the invitation about what it is to be alive here, to fall through this world. Somehow I just can't find a way that I would be comforted on my deathbed to think, *I sure avoided a lot of suffering. I sure avoided a lot of life. Good on me.*

The time will come soon enough that we will fall into the darkness and through it, and onto something else, some other part of the universe. There isn't that much time left for all of us as I look around the room. So what will you do as we fall together through this world? Will you accept the invitation? Will you take the step off into the air, into the unknown, and see what happens? Will you embrace that as a part of life? Will you bless your life and bring in the question that we've been asking in lots of different ways over the last year : Do you fundamentally trust your life? Even if you can't see what's going to happen, even if you're not entirely in control, do you trust your life? If you do, what's that like? If you don't, what's that like?

The clear-sighted person, willingly, with open hands and open heart and a wish and a prayer, falls into a well if a well is what presents itself. That, according to these old koans, is exactly the Way.

Q1 : I'm a bit perplexed by the difference between my reaction and my relationship to a koan. My reaction *is* part of my relationship. And saying, "Oh, it's cold," is just as much of a reaction as "Eew! It's cold." It's just a different kind of reaction. But that's how I'm working with that image.

JIS : So, you and I are talking. And you say something that hurts me. Doesn't matter whether you meant to or not, but it does. And I think, *Wow, she really just hurt me!* And I'm out

of the conversation with you. I'm thinking about how you just hurt me. It's really a different thing for me to stay in the conversation with you and ask, "What did you mean by that?" You're right. There is a sense in which both are reactions. But one turns away. The other remains in the relationship.

Q1 : So there are different kinds of reactions. That create very different kinds of laws.

JIS : You can even say there are different reactions to our reactions. Because the reaction that turns away is the reaction that assumes that whatever we're feeling is the most important thing. That I think you hurt me is now more important than that I'm having a conversation with you. So my opinion is that my reaction is the thing that I need to attend to — the most important thing. Another opinion is that my conversation with you is the most important thing. So I'm going to stay in and see if I can figure this out.

Q1 : One reaction separates you and one reaction keeps you in there. Part of what makes them different is that sense that one reaction has negative charge to it.

JIS : To use the language that we've been using, it's partial. My hurt just took control of the ship. Whereas, if I stay in the conversation with you, that's a more whole and realistic picture, because you're in there still. It's a bigger view, more spacious. A lot of what practice is about is stepping back from those times when we get partial, and into a possibility where we get greater human wholeness.

Q1 : Which has to do with your connection to that person, too.

JIS : Yeah, you're still here. My world is bigger because it includes you still. Which is a more realistic view, because my world *does* include you.

Q1 : And so you want to feel that.

JIS: Yeah. So, it seems like anything that would happen out of that would be a more realistic outcome than anything that would happen out of my letting my hurt steer the ship. And that seems like a good thing.

Q1 : Do you have any advice on how to keep from going partial?

JIS : Notice it. Notice it and interrupt it.

Q1 : Make a conscious effort to come back.

JIS: Yeah. If your intention is to notice it and stop it, then you'll interrupt it automatically and then you can even pull back into the moment before the separation. It's a matter of

undoing rather than having to do something else. If you just undo, then it will take care of itself. And you'll be back in that moment where it's more whole.

Q1 : If someone's hurt you, if you're going back to the moment before, you're not addressing it. Something's happened that's changed our connection because I'm hurt. So, going back to the moment before is not really confronting that. It's not going to enable healing if I have to engage with you around that somehow.

JIS : The moment before is the moment I went off, got hurt, and left the relationship.

Q1 : It's not the moment before I said it.

JIS : Right.

Q1 : It's not the moment you react.

JIS : Right. And from there, you do an inquiry : "Well, what was that?" But I bring it to you; I'm not just doing it inside my head. "What did you mean by that?" What changes is, rather than make a statement about what happened, I'm asking a question.

Q2 : I was thinking about justifying, making a justification, as related to "Eww!" The minute you find yourself justifying it's because of your hurt. I had an incident in which I'd done something wrong, and my desire was to make it right, because I'd made a mistake and I needed to figure out why, I hadn't meant to, and on and on.

It was all about leaving a door unlocked. It was wrong and people were mad and I found I needed to justify my actions. My keys were taken away, which is real childish. So I thought, *Do I really care if I have those keys? No, I don't.* It felt better, but I was drawn into the drama, so to speak. It's so easy because of what 'they' are doing. We play a role in that drama because that's the one presenting itself rather than, *Do I really want that role? No.*

Once I stepped back I could let go of how I was wrong. It was a mistake, that's all it was. Not a reason to go into the 'whys' with them. I was trying to make myself feel better about making a mistake.

JIS : So what is it like to stay with "I made a mistake"?

Q2 : Right. And not even go back to *I didn't even want the keys to begin with* or whatever. It would be extraordinary to just say from the beginning, "I made a mistake," and never go in any of those other directions.

JIS : You're pointing to an important part of it, which is that we pull the camera back and see it from a bigger perspective.

Q1 : Being so close to it is claustrophobic. It feels awful, in that same “Eew” way.

JIS : Can you feel how in the moment when you say, “Oh, I made a mistake. Here are the keys,” you free them, too? You’re free. They’re free. They don’t have to play out their role around a claustrophobic topic anymore. It takes all the air out of it.

Q2 : Yeah. It takes the energy away. Otherwise it’s just like a movie. You enter it and say I’ll play this role; you play that one. And “Eew” at each other. Better to stop and say I made a mistake.

JIS : That’s great. Yeah.

Q3 : I am trying to understand trusting in your life. It seems difficult under harsh circumstances.

JIS : Thank you, that’s important. The kind of trust I’m talking about doesn’t have to do with whether things turn out the way we want them to or not, or how we think they should. That’s an ego-level trust. This is something below that. Even when bad things happen — I don’t want to minimize bad things at all — even when really bad things happen, how do we feel about life? Do we trust life? Are we mistrustful of it? And if we’re mistrustful because of things that have happened, does it have to always be that way? Is there a way to work with that so that we can incorporate even the bad things that have happened as our life, and bless our *entire* life, not just the parts of it we like best?

Q3 : So then you go, *Oh, I bless that thing, or that thing blesses me.*

JIS : Can you imagine that?

Q3 : I can do it when I’m sitting here.

JIS : So do it here a bunch, use this place, this space, then see if you can take it with you when you leave and carry it with you. Whichever question strikes you the most, “Do I trust my life?” or “Do I bless my life?” keep that question with you like a stone in your pocket, take it out every once in a while, check it out, and see what happens.

Q4 : Gravity holds you up sometimes.

JIS : Exactly.

Thank you.