

Unromancing *No*
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The romance of realizing a first koan like Zhaozhou's *No* is a powerful and beautiful one. It offers us the possibility of experiencing what we know must be true: There is a vast and wondrous dimension to life, whose revelation will put doubts to rest and support a deep and abiding happiness for ourselves and others. And the stakes are so high. Pablo Neruda wrote:

If we were not so singleminded about
keeping our lives moving,
and for once could do nothing,
Perhaps a huge silence might interrupt this
sadness
of never understanding ourselves
and of threatening ourselves with death.¹

In the face of this urgency, Zhaozhou's *No* can become a kind of prayer for salvation. The old Zen stories that end with the student suddenly experiencing enlightenment are like the fairytale "...and then they lived happily ever after." The promise in such stories attaches to a deep human longing: Enlightenment will reveal a timeless, unchanging state truer than our ordinary way of experiencing things. And we will be made timeless and unchanging ourselves—ever peaceful, ever free from suffering, ever wise. *No* will save us from having to be our unsatisfactory selves and live our messy lives.

As compelling as this romance is, it misses something actually richer, stranger, and ultimately more beautiful than the search for happily ever after. Far from saving us from our own lives, *No* leads us right into the heart of life. It invites us to see the world as it is and to love it, in all its tenderness and misery. It shows us how to loosen the compulsions of the self and let the space that's created be filled with care for others. It asks a lot of us, and it offers us a genuine life in return.

Here, then, are some notes towards unromancing *No*.

The first thing I want to do is set aside the word *enlightenment*, which is obscured behind a cloud of mythology and projection. Instead, I'll speak of awakening, which is a journey that unfolds over a lifetime, in the way particular to each person who makes it. Awakening is the process of opening the heart and clarifying the mind that is made real

in a person's life. It isn't a destination; it's the path each of us is already walking, and it's unfolding in big and small ways all the time.

A breakthrough is what I'll call that sudden opening to the vastness sometimes referred to as passing through the gate of *No*. It's a transformation of consciousness that is a significant though small part of the larger process of awakening. What is revealed in a breakthrough isn't something truer than our usual experience: It is an *aspect* of reality, just as the way we ordinarily experience the world is also an aspect of reality. We know the limitations of our ordinary way of seeing things—it's often what provokes people to take up meditation in the first place—and opening to the vastness does make a difference. But thinking that the breakthrough view is more real misses what is actually so: The world is one whole thing, and it is only our human perspective that creates categories of vast and ordinary. Working with koans is a way to integrate these two views, to experience the one whole thing. Happily ever after? Sure. And also painfully ever after, and no before and after, and no ever and no ending of ever. And all of it just fine.

While *No* has a venerable tradition as a first koan, there are others that work just as well, such as Hakuin's Sound of One Hand, the Original Face, or Who Hears?. The truth is that any koan might light up for someone, and it's always thrilling when a person's eyes start shining about some koan I'd never thought of as a first. Everything I'll say about *No* also applies to these other koans when they're taken up in the same way.

To start, it's good to let go of your ideas about what awakening should be and notice what's actually happening. Mark Bittner, author of *The Wild Parrots of Telegraph Hill*, describes how he was holed up in a cottage near where the parrots live to write a book about them. After a few days they found him and came to squawk and peck at his windows. He'd be writing about how wonderful the birds were and how much he loved them, and then he'd get up to shoo them away. "Leave me alone, I'm writing an important book about parrots here!"

The parrots of awakening are always beating at the windows, but if you're caught up in the romance of *No* you might shoo them away, because you've got some important concentration on your koan to do. Maybe you're taking Neruda's huge silence literally, thinking it has something to do with quiet

¹ Translated by Stephen Mitchell

and calm. Concentration practice is incredibly important as long as you remember that it's a method, not a goal in itself. It has its virtues and its vices like all methods, and it might not be the answer to every question. There are times when it's just right to dive deep and stay there, going after *No* with a great ferocity. And there are other times when something else is in the Tao: Letting your meditation be dreamy, say, or meditating on the fly—three deep breaths at the stoplight—because of some urgent circumstance in your life.

One of the reasons we translate *Mu* to *No* is because *Mu* can reinforce the sense of a first koan as talisman, a special focus of concentration so unrelated to anything else that it pulls your attention away from the world around you. *No*, on the other hand, is vivid and even startling. Why No? No to what? What's it like to breathe *No* every time you have a reaction to something, or see the face of someone you love? It's powerful to question even the positive ways you're used to seeing people and things you care about. A woman went to pick up her dog after a retreat in which she'd had a glimpse through the gate of *No*. As the dog came bounding down the path towards her, the woman saw that all her habitual and mostly unconscious ways of experiencing this creature—she's my dog, I love her, she loves me—were just not there. Instead, here was this luminous and completely autonomous being appearing before her. When even the woman's positive filters were gone, the dog was never more beautiful to her, or more beloved.

From the moment you take up *No*, nothing you do is a detour. Everything that happens is the journey itself: You love the koan, you hate the koan, you're frustrated, you're blissful. Life goes well for you, life falls apart, nothing much happens at all. *No* doesn't mind. You can't bribe *No* with good meditation or good deeds. Working with *No* is something more challenging than a self-improvement project: It's a radical deconstruction of what you're sure of—your hard-won assumptions about life, habits of mind, and usual sense of yourself—so that the world as it actually is, rather than the stories you tell about the world, becomes increasingly visible. As the deconstruction begins, people sometimes wonder whether they really want to go through with it. It's becoming clear that this transformation thing is actually going to require some change, and that isn't always easy.

If nothing is a detour, you don't need to turn away from anything, including your own doubt about whether you ought to be doing this. Paradoxically, *No* is profoundly nondualistic: It contains a great *Yes*, a growing willingness to meet the world and your own inner states with warmth

and curiosity. If you've been rejecting anything, refusing to feel some pain or anxiety, *No* will show you that, too, in the small moments and the large. The difficult relative, welcome. The blank computer screen of death, welcome. The war in Iraq, come on in. Sit down, war, we really need to talk.

The other side of that coin is noticing that your thoughts and feelings don't actually go away if you ignore or reject them. If you believe that they don't belong in your meditation, you risk creating a split between the 'purity' of meditation and the complexities of your own inner life—in other words, with who you actually are. *No* works against this kind of split by breathing spaciousness into everything. Over time, you see that there's not much need to suppress thoughts and feelings, because they become just things rising in a very large field that is filled with many other things, too. And naturally, without having to engineer it, they become less compelling; your attention isn't captured so much by them, and they grow quieter on their own. Thoughts and feelings are welcome, but now they're like travelers to whom you offer hospitality but not permission to build a fire on the living room rug. You no longer take these visitors at face value; you question and wonder. *I'm so tired and frustrated—and the problem is...?* People find that they get two or three sentences into one of the old scripts—*She always* and *I never*—and they just can't go on; it becomes almost comical. This *No* inquiry is a more genuine relationship with your thoughts and feelings than either suppressing them or giving them the run of the place, neither of which, when you think about it, is really much of a relationship at all.

No also works on any residual split between meditation and 'the rest of your life'. It's constantly mixing things up: Where's the moment when you've stopped meditating and gone on to something else? Is that such a bright line anymore? What's it like to greet the rise and fall of thoughts and feelings with the same warmth and curiosity you're bringing to your family or your work? How are your sleep and your dreams? One of the lovely things about koan practice is how completely portable it is, requiring no special apparatus or elaborate preparation. It can be practiced in the space of a few breaths, anytime and anywhere. As someone takes up a first koan like *No*, I also give her Koans to Carry in Your Pocket, a collection of short phrases from the koans that can be pulled out and used at any time. "There is nothing I dislike." "Luckily no one is looking." "What is most intimate?"

This last question points to perhaps the most painful split that *No* can address: the one that causes us to feel separated from the rest of life, bounded by

our skull and skin in a kind of perpetual exile. At the same time that *No* is creating more space inside us, it is also making us more permeable to the world around us. Like those wild parrots, life is always coming to fetch us, and taking up *No* helps make us fetchable. The koan tradition is full of such moments: Seven hundred years ago, someone has been meditating in the garden deep into the night. He gets up and reaches for the wall to steady himself, but the wall isn't there, and when he falls there is only falling going on, and he drops all the way into eternity. In our own time, a woman is looking at her computer. She stumbles across a description of a breakthrough she had a few years ago and suddenly it's there again, completely, and the world is full of light. A breakthrough often begins with surprise, when there's a moment of freefall before the world snaps back into focus in the usual way. If we don't struggle to stop the falling, when the world does reconstitute itself it will seem different, more like home in the deepest sense. The Chan teacher Dongshan wrote of an old woman who awakens at dawn and looks into the ancient mirror, only to see a face entirely her own.

At any time, *No* or a Pocket Koan might invite us into an instant of falling freely. When you can't keep going with one of your tried-and-true stories but dissolve in laughter instead, that's the everyday version of what happens in a breakthrough. Instead of asking *No* to do the work for you, to provide you with a thunderclap of happily ever after, your awakening is becoming a collaboration with *No* and the world. You're changing, the world around you seems to be changing a little, too—even *No* changes as you go on. Difficult things keep happening, but you feel as though you have more resources for meeting them.

The presence of the vastness becomes palpable in the everyday world. More and more, you experience the dreamlike quality of things, the provisional nature of consensus reality. *No* can reveal the language of the trees, the bright, grainy texture of the air, the way everything blinks in and out of existence too rapidly to see with your usual eyes. This is another aspect of the one whole thing, and it is both wonderful and profoundly subversive of our usual habits of mind.

Keeping company with koans like this is a complete and satisfying way to live. It's also possible that you'll have, once or many times, a breakthrough experience. No two breakthroughs begin or unfold in exactly the same way, even for the same person. Sometimes it's not so much a vivid flash as a slow-rising dawn, gradually lightening the sky, and it's only by looking back that the change becomes clear. Sometimes a breakthrough comes

when it seems most unlikely, when you're full of illness or pain or doubt.

In the same way that Zhaozhou said "No!", the Chan teacher Yunmen used to shout "Barrier!", referring to a massive, locked gate at the frontier. There are times in working with *No* that you face such a barrier, blocking you in on all sides, making it impossible to move. There's nowhere to go, and yet if you stay where you are you feel as though you'll die. This is the full-on, unrelenting, charged-with-energy *No*: No to everything you know, No to everything you're good at, No to plans and prayers and negotiations. When there's no way out and you can't keep doing what you've been doing, what do you do?

In one of the old koan collections, Yunmen's "Barrier!" is followed by someone asking Zhaozhou, "Who *are* you?" Zhaozhou replies, "East gate, west gate, north gate, south gate." I've always been a little queasy about the thought that everything is a dharma gate; it so easily lends itself to the idea that the value of others is in their usefulness to us, and that we somehow step *through* them into something more important. For Zhaozhou the barriers are inside *us*, and *No* helps us pick the locks. Look, he says, when the barriers are gone you are a city with open gates, where all are welcome and there's not a gatekeeper in sight.

The city of open gates is a joyful place to spend a while. And then, over time, the intensity of a breakthrough begins to recede, and the concerns of daily life roll back in on the tide. This isn't a failure or a loss; it's exactly what's supposed to happen, because the next stage of awakening is to embody this experience in your life. Realization means understanding something, and it also means making it real—tangible, having an effect in the world. We tend to think of our awakening as something deeply personal, but it also belongs to the world in some way; the world, after all, has come to fetch us, to welcome us home, to invite us to turn our awakening into matter.

Often people describe a kind of game they play while a breakthrough is still vivid, holding things up to their experience and checking, Is it this? Is it washing the dishes at the end of an exhausting day? Is it a harsh word from a friend, a bounced check, a troublesome vote in the Senate? At some point, weeks or months after a breakthrough, the stakes get raised, and many people experience a kind of crash back into life. It can be physical, like an illness or accident; psychological, usually in the form of depression or fear; or spiritual, a crisis of doubt. Often it's a chaotic and destabilizing time, when the whole meaning of awakening can be called into question. It's as though the world is

playing its own version of our game: “That’s all very well, your experience of the shining whole, but what about *this*? Is this it, too?”

If hope remains anywhere inside you that awakening will save you from having to live your life, that illusion will now be well and truly shattered. Here is your life, demanding to be lived. Here is the next gift of the koans, provoking you to discover whether you really can integrate what you’ve come to know of the vastness with what you’ve come to see more clearly about the everyday. This can be a difficult time, but if you hold through, something genuinely transforming happens: You find that you are content to be living this human life, and you no longer need things to be different in order to be happy. This sounds rather unromantic and small, but to genuinely feel like this is to be free.

Hand in hand with this is the deep desire for things to get better so that others can find their own way to happiness. In the world view of the koans, it somehow makes perfect sense to be committed to changing things for the benefit of others without needing to change them for yourself. The level at which you might do this isn’t grand: nothing about trying to convert people or invading to bring them democracy. What seems self-evidently desirable are the fundamental things that make it possible for others to get free: clean water, no bombs or landmines, intervening in global warming before people’s homes start disappearing under the waves.

Once Zhaozhou asked another teacher, Touzi, how he’d describe coming back to life after a profound breakthrough, which is sometimes called a great death. Touzi replied that you can’t do it by walking about in the night, by which he meant by clinging to your breakthrough; you come back by giving yourself to the daylight. To fully realize *No*, you have to give yourself to the sunlit, everyday world. You have to care, to make art and babies and run for town council. You crash back into life because life, with all its complications and disappointments and heartbreak, is the ground of our awakening.

As you step back into the everyday you’re not abandoned to fate and blind chance, because there are all the other koans. If you keep company with them, they’ll show you how to deepen and widen the opening that started with *No*. At first they show you where the light shines brightly for you and where it’s obscured, and they help the light spread to the shaded places. Then they ask you to articulate your experience as you go, which refines your understanding. And all along they’re pushing you to integrate the big view with your everyday

life. Koans make sure that once you’ve been transformed you stay transformed.

I can’t say I completely understand how koans like *No* work. I can’t say that they cause awakening in any sense that we usually mean ‘cause’. Perhaps they just keep us open, or off-balance, so that other things can act upon us, so that we’re fetchable. This week I think that their importance as a spiritual technology lies in their ability to reliably show us three aspects of awakening: the shining, eternal face whose revelation is one of the deepest graces we humans can experience; the shape-shifting face that invites us, along with everything else, to dream the world into existence; and the complicated earthly face, in whose presence we have to care about the world and exert ourselves on its behalf. And that the koans encourage our doubt, and ask us to trust our own experience, and don’t give an inch on the important things. And I do notice that if people are willing to take up a koan like *No* with their whole selves, they tend to get kinder and wiser and more courageous. I don’t know about happily ever after, but that sure seems like happily right here and now to me.