BOUNDLESS WAY ZEN

Dharma talks, sermons
and teishos

INTIMATE, INTIMATE
Fayen's Two Monks Roll Up the Blinds

A Dharma Talk
By James Myoun Ford

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The Case

The great Fayen Wenyi took the high seat before the midday meal to preach to his assembly. Raising his hand he pointed to the bamboo blinds. Two monks went and rolled them up in the same manner. Fayen said, 'One gains; one loses.'

Wumen's Comment

Tell me, which one gained? Which one lost? If you have the single eye regarding this, you will see where the National Teacher Qingliang failed. But I must warn you most firmly against arguing gain and loss.

Wumen's Verse

When they are rolled up the great sky is bright and clear,
but the great sky still does not match our Way.
Why don't you throw away that sky completely?
Then not a breath of wind will come through.

A couple of years ago I gave a talk on this case. If you're interested it's archived at the

Boundless Way website. Recently a friend alluded to this case in a conversation and based on what was said, I thought I'd like to give it another go.

First, a reminder about koans and encountering them as a spiritual practice. There is a lot of nonsense written about them. If you've been interested in Zen for any length of time, you've probably read some of that nonsense, maybe a lot of it. I'm sympathetic to the dilemma. From the outside it's hard to discern what's useful and what's not. And if you're interested in Zen, it's hard not to be interested in koans.

Scholars have tackled koans, Zen teachers who practice in non-koan traditions such as "pure Soto" that do not use koan introspection as a normative part of their discipline have written and spoken about koans, people who've spent a week or a weekend at a Zen monastic center have written about koans, in fact people who've just held a book in their hands once have written about koans. Now, as they say, even a blind pig will occasionally root out a truffle, and it's hard to find one of these commentators who haven't gotten some point right.

But koans offer something wonderful. And I encourage those who've come here to study the great way, if koans whisper to you, beckon to you on your way; let go of what you've learned about them, whether nonsense or not. And instead, come to them with open hands, with open ears, with open hearts.

And from that perspective let's see what old Fayen has to say.

Fayen Wenyi, called Hogen in Japanese Zen, as I observed in my last talk on this case flourished on the cusp of the ninth and tenth centuries. Those who are fond of history will note he comes at the tail end of the classical period of Chinese Zen, a time rather like our own, rich and dangerous. He originally studied with Changqing Huileng. But, then he encountered Chanqing's cousin in the dharma, Luohan Guichen, a fateful meeting. Their encounter is the stuff of koans.

Fayen and some companions were caught in a snowstorm and took refuge at Dizang Monastery where the abbot, Luohan Guichen asked Fayen, "What is your journey?" In a Zen context always a dangerous question. How are you doing? Becomes the stuff of life and death. Fayen replied, "Going around on pilgrimage." Not a bad answer, but not sparkling, either. Dizang, abbots are often known by the name of their temple, pushed a bit further, inquiring, "What do you expect from pilgrimage?" Then Fayen gave the simplest of answers. "I don't know." The time was ripe, what in Christian theology is sometimes called kairos, the time of fulfillment. Dizang didn't even need to pluck the fruit, it was so ripe. Instead he simply blew on

it, gently, saying "Not knowing is most intimate." Fayen understood.

Fayen had his first glimpse of awakening, what Joko Beck calls a small intimation. Nothing special, and at the very same time it's the gateway to a life of wisdom.

Fayen continued to practice with Dizang and eventually received Dharma transmission from him. At first he taught at Chongshou monastery in Linchuan, then settled at Qingliang Monastery, the name he is often known by, where he taught for the rest of his life. It is said at one point there were more than a thousand monastics in residence there.

He was one of the great ancestors of our way, and stories of his encounters with students and others abound. Andy Ferguson's magisterial *Zen's Chinese Heritage*, an English language Lamp Record (Lamp Records are traditional collections of the sayings and actions of Zen worthies compiled first in Chinese then later in Japanese, Korean, and I'm sure Vietnamese) gives a number.

"A monk asked, 'What was the style of the ancient Buddha's?' Fayen replied 'Where can it not be completely seen?'" "A monk asked, 'If someone is seeking an understanding of Buddha, what's the best path to doing so?' Fayen replied, 'It doesn't pass by here.'" And, of course, "Once, when a monk was visiting Fayen, the old master pointed to a blind. Two monks went to roll it up. Fayen said, 'One gains, one loss.'"

It is that last question that we consider this evening. It was gathered by Wumen as the twenty-sixth case of his classic collection the *Wumenquan*, the "Gateless Gate."

Back to the general matter of koans. They are not meaningless statements designed to rattle you into a state of trans-rational consciousness, as I've seen repeated by a number of people. Nor are they questions without answers. There's always an answer. They're statements about reality made from the position of one who sees without attachment to form or emptiness. And at the same time they're an invitation to each of us to stand in that very place.

When we do, the response is immediately obvious. The response will fit the question like a lid to a box. Some will obviously be exactly the same response every time, some will obviously call for a nuanced response based on the immediate situation. Each and every response comes from our seeing we are individual, unique, never to be repeated, and at the same time one thing, the great emptiness, the great boundless, and at the same time not attached to any name or form, or even to that boundless.

Get it?

Perhaps a glimpse? Perhaps not?

It's worth noting that Aitken Roshi points out the encounter leading to that lovely line not-knowing is most intimate, was just the beginning of Fayen's journey of awakening. Aitken Roshi points out that later on the same journey that brought Fayen to Daizang's temple, as Fayen prepared to continue on his pilgrimage, the abbot pointed at a boulder and observed how "many say the Three Worlds exist because the mind and all phenomena arise from recognition. So, tell me, does that boulder exist in the mind or outside?"

Fayen replied "In the mind." To which Dizang responded, "That stone will soon become very heavy for you to carry around in your mind." So what if we understand that form and emptiness are identical, as we hear in the Heart Sutra, as a lesson learned in school? What does that matter if we don't really know it in our bones and marrow? What does it matter if the identity of the world and the boundless are just wise words we hold up as an icon of our faith?

Or, perhaps we have an inkling. It's not exactly an idea, it is something we feel is true, somehow.

It's true a taste of water is water. But neither is it diving into the great ocean.

There's a joke I really like that points to something about this case. I've heard a number of versions, the best one is probably the Jewish one. But I just can't do Yiddish accents, so forgive the Episcopal version.

The Rector, Father Jones walked into the sanctuary one weekday afternoon, and as he saw the light cascade through the stained glass windows and onto the altar was overcome with emotion. He knelt before the cross, bowed his head and said in a horse voice, barely ore than a whisper, "God, you are everything. I am nothing." His curate, Ms Smith walked in just behind him and witnessed this. She too felt the power of the moment, the simple beauty of it all, and as she was a good Episcopal assistant minister, knelt just behind the rector, bowed her head and joined with the prayer, "God, you are everything. I am nothing."

Then Fred the sexton, that's church-talk for janitor, wandered in, and, he too, felt the waves of the moment. So, well back in the pews, he, too, knelt, bowed his head and prayed, "God, you are everything. I am nothing."

The two priests looked back and saw Fred. The assistant leaned toward her senior and whispered, "Look who thinks he's nothing."

This case is not about right and wrong, good or ill, about self-esteem or self-aggrandizement. It's a direct pointing to what is real and invites us to respond from that place.

Aitken Roshi pushes the point when he tells us "Ultimately Fayen is not saying merely that gain is gain, loss is loss, high places are high, and low places are low – though this is certainly an overtone of his words. To see into his meaning, you must take gain and loss as the fundamental configuration of the universe, beyond evolution and entropy."

There's a pointer.

The Rinzai master Zenkei Shibayama in his comments on this case quotes an unnamed master who tells us "This koan aims to arouse the Great Doubt in the mind of… students. If they were to try to understand the significance of 'One has it; the other has not' with their intellect and reasoning, it would be like looking for horns on rabbits and horses.'"

Not that we don't occasionally stumble upon unicorns. But the miracle of the koan lies within its very ordinariness, its invitation to our immediate, ordinary, right here and now, seeing into what is. Shibayama Roshi first asks "What is the truth of the oneness of the universal Principle and phenomena?" And then he warns us, "Unless you can show me the live fact as your answer, it cannot be Zen."

One gains, one loses.

Intimate, intimate.

This is the invitation.