

BOUNDLESS WAY ZEN

Dharma talks, sermons
and teishos

August, 2007

Passing Through Xuefeng's Net

Sansheng asked Xuefeng, "The golden fish has passed through the net. What will it eat?"
Xuefeng said: "I will tell you when you have passed through the net."
Sancho said, "A great Zen master of 1,500 monks and you still can't answer this question.
Xuefeng replied "This old monk is too busy with temple affairs."

Case 49 from the Blue Cliff Record

The cryptic interchange above is a koan: a brief vignette that has been passed down in the Zen tradition as a tool to deepen our understanding of this mystery of being a human being. Traditionally koan are studied under the guidance of a qualified teacher in the context of an ongoing meditation practice. But since they point to universal truths of experience, they are also useful to anyone with a genuine curiosity about the nature of our life. Like any text, we can appreciate the characters and images as aspects of ourselves and our journey. I offer the following thoughts in the spirit of opening the door and offering this koan to you for your use and edification.

As human beings, most of our life is lived in relation to nets – to the things that we perceive as limiting us. We don't have enough time or money or energy. Our job or relationship is not what we think it should be. No sooner have we solved one problem than the next arises. Ask someone how they are, and they will probably tell you about what they are struggling with – what their net of the moment is.

Though we may complain bitterly, when we look deeper we see that we are actually quite attached to our problems. Our sense of who we are is rooted deeply in what we perceive

as our limitations, and when the possibility of letting them go arises, we resist mightily. Our problems may cause us to suffer, but they are also part of our identity. For example I might say something like ‘I am the one who always puts things off to the last minute.’ Though I feel bad about myself for procrastinating, it is a dependable part of my identity. Giving up this behavior would threaten my sense of who I am, even if I don’t even like the fact that I procrastinate.

In Zen meditation, we sit silently with the intention to be with our actual experience of THIS moment – not our ideas and opinions, but our experience itself. As we sit silently in stillness, we notice how we are constantly being dragged off into realms of thinking about our life rather than being with our life. The instruction for practice is to bring our attention back again and again to our breath and our posture – to the sensations of this moment.

As we keep returning to the present moment, we begin to see how this self that we think we are – the one that appears so solid and real, is in fact something we are constantly constructing. Our minds, seemingly of their own accord, use bits of our experience to piece together this fiction of an enduring self. Our opinions and judgments of ourselves are key building blocks in this construction business. The Sufi poet Rumi says this activity is like sewing patches on clothes that are falling apart – we have to keep sewing constantly to keep them together. The only path to freedom is in learning how to stop sewing the patches on the clothes of our self-identity.

Looking closely we see that our ideas, of who we are and who we should be, are the net that is holding us. The cost of freedom from this net of self is everything we think we are, including what we think of as our problems. As we begin to let go of these ideas of who we are, we begin to see that our problems – the very ones we have complained about – have functioned like a compass for us.

Our troublesome limitations have been a stabilizing influence, something we could count on as true. So when the possibility arises that they might be taken away – that we might not have to live our lives within this contracted place – we notice a resistance and great uneasiness that arises.

Our fierce devotion to our personal limitation was humorously illustrated in the movie *Dogma*, when a flaming angel from on high visits one of the character. He reacts with utter

terror. Rather than welcoming the celestial visitor, he finds a fire extinguisher and tries to put out the flames. Our natural reaction to the unlimited spaciousness and possibility of life is to contract and pull away. We try to extinguish the intensity of the here and now by clinging to what limits us.

This 'net' that limits us is also our conception of how our life should be. While I am a great believer in setting goals and taking action to change our lives, on another level, all this planning can keep us from realizing the freedom in *this* moment. As humans we have the capacity and even responsibility to imagine and create change. But the other reality is that at *this* moment, things are just as they are – regardless of our opinion of how they, or we, should be.

To walk on the road of liberation, we have to be willing to tolerate a lot of uncertainty: to find ways of being when what we are familiar with has been taken away. The central question of this koan – What will the fish eat once it swims through the net of constraint? – is a real one for all of us. How do we 'eat' -- how do we live and function and find direction -- in a world beyond the familiar and comforting 'net' of our ideas about our life?

Xuefeng's first answer is simple and to the point: "I will tell you when you are free from the net yourself." Xuefeng is not being flip or dismissive, but explaining that the problem of what to do beyond the net cannot be answered from within the net. Our language and our ideas from the world of gain and loss cannot be used to talk about a world beyond them. We might even say the question itself is a 'net' question and cannot be answered from within the net.

If you want to learn how to swim, all the descriptions of the mechanics of swimming will be only marginally useful when you find yourself surrounded by the real wetness of the water. To learn to swim, most of us need a combination of instruction and opportunity to be in the water ourselves. On the deepest level, we have to learn how to swim by swimming. Picasso expressed this "learn by doing" approach when he wrote, "I am always doing that which I do not know how to do in order to learn how to do it."

Sansheng's response -- "A great Zen master of 1,500 monks and you still can't answer this question" -- is an example of how we push back on Xuefeng's response to this urgent question. When we feel that we are stuck in the net of our lives, we come to a teacher to receive 'real' answers. We want more than 'You'll understand when you're older.' We

experience ourselves as trapped by the net of our lives and we want an answer that makes sense. How do we escape the net?

Xuefeng's final response is actually a demonstration of how to live beyond the net while in the net. He doesn't turn to fancy words or explanations, but to the momentary 'suchness' of his life: he is busy with the responsibilities of his job. This clear response is proclaiming that there is no net, that the circumstances of our life are just the circumstances of our life, not something that is holding us back.

'No net' is not a position that says nothing exists and we have no responsibilities. It is not the nihilistic freedom of 'doing your own thing'. It is rather finding our freedom in the actual circumstances of the moment. Xuefeng is the Abbot of the temple and his teaching of how to be free, how to act appropriately without being bound by circumstances is to act in accordance with circumstances. Nothing extra.

This koan points us toward a profoundly different view of the 'limitations' of our life. Rather than something to be overcome or a problem to be solved, we are encouraged to view the circumstances of our life as simply the truth of the moment. We imagine we are caught in a net. We imagine we are not free. But when we meet our experience moment to moment as the truth of our life, we find that what seemed to be a limitation is actually an invitation, a doorway into what we have been seeking all our lives.

[\[X\] CHINA MENU](#)

[\[X\] HOME](#)