



Zen Open Circle

“Yes, we have no bananas” (or) “Intimate in the dark”

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As everybody knows who has attended sesshin before, this is the night of not knowing - of not knowing as our most intimate practice-realization.

‘Intimate’ is a way of saying: awake, complete, present, not even a speck of difference, as intimate and close in to unabridged reality as that. And I love the fact that the word intimate also offers the tenderness of being, because that is what awake-ness is.

I was tempted to call this talk, "Awake in the dark", since it is the dark of not knowing in which we awaken and of course at this moment it's night as well. But I actually think I'll call it, "Yes, we have no bananas". I always loved the fact that there's such a triumphant "Yes!" before the completely sanguine, “We have no bananas”. The idea that *no* bananas is so joyously proclaimed, recognized, as a welcome matter in some way.

What would a no-banana taste like?

‘Mu’ is of course this one syllable short of complete silence with which we practice letting go of the mind-road. The mind-road is not the kind of open, empty road we can easily love, accompanying you with no-birds, no-trees, no-insects, and best of all, no-you. The mind-road is

more like the pressured highway, whizzing with traffic, burdened with noise, shouting at you with signs, and always making the false promise of ‘somewhere to go’.

We practise letting that soften, die down, fall away, grow dark, until we can open our eyes in that dark. In other words, whether formally take up as you koan or not, we practice Mu when we sit zazen. And so we return every first night of sesshin to Mu in time-honoured fashion, to establish it as the no-base on which all awakening opens.

Ever since Zhaozhou replied to the monk who asked, "Does a dog have Buddha nature or not?" with just "Wu" in Chinese, which in Japanese that becomes "Mu". Late in the classical age of Chinese Zen, Dahui took up the practise of this one-word Mu as the first ‘gate’, the *huatou* (or ‘head word’, meaning leading word, that opens us to realization of no-gate, no-separation, undivided wholeness. The word to follow all the way into the dark of not knowing.

A *huatou* declines all impulses towards conjecture, all reaching with discursive knowing. It does so with great generosity, a deep kindness to us. And leaves us in the embrace of not knowing, drawing us there, with suddenness or over time. It doesn’t matter how we come home. Only that we do.

So, of course Zhaozhou would be entirely at home with "Yes, we have no bananas!" It’s not ‘No’ opposed to ‘Yes’, here – rather, the end of Yes and No and the dawn of ‘No’ as the vast No-no, and No-yes, justwell, bananas. Also you. Me. The Milky Way.

I like that old character in the silly and yet wise old TV series, ‘The Vicar of Dibley’, who always seemed to wind his way on to every church committee, and when asked, almost reluctantly by the Vicar, "Well, do you agree?" or ‘What do you think?', what would flow helplessly out of him was, "Oh, no no no no no no no no" (everyone by now looking worried) and then arriving home in a final gasp of "Yes."

Thus describing Mu practice beautifully. Nothing but "Mu, mu mu, mu" and then, at last, a great quiet, "Oh yes! Yes, yes."

There's is no "Yes" or "No" opposed in Mu, of course. At another point in the conversation, Zhaozhou responded "Yes" (“U”) to the question "Does a dog have Buddha nature or not?". Notice in both cases, both having and not having are resoundingly *not* confirmed. "Yes" - has Buddha nature, "Yes" - does not have Buddha nature. Not that he

was trying to play word games, not at all, and if you have any doubts about dog Buddha nature, any dog will quickly confirm what's what and be the best kind of checking question.

So a question which appears to be about a dog having/not having Buddha nature is of course a question about *your* Buddha nature. What is the way here? What is the way to realize what has been ours, from before even our own parents were born? What is the way to enter that mysterious beginning-less matter? How do we touch it? How do we let it touch us? How do we make ourselves vulnerable? How do we come to a place where the essential matter of our practice, this sense of, this realization of no self at all can become who and what we are completely? Letting 'Mu' rearrange you all the way down to your original self, your buddha-nature.

Some people in other zendos are invited to work with this 'Mu' as 'No'. However, while 'No' may be effective in helping you make the cut each time you try to verbally replace reality (the 'mind road'), 'Mu' for me is generously even less than 'No'. Untranslated, it can open without boundaries, without anything being able to be placed upon it, without the slightest chance of making it a 'something'. I think there's something very valuable about the fact that Mu has nothing you can attach to it, not even "No".

We begin to see that Mu ('un-', 'no-', 'not-') is bestowing a kind of 'no-thing-ness' upon whatever we might bring up before it, whatever we might try to bring to meet it. Mu says 'not that way!' It kindly takes away our construction, conjecture, whatever we may try to put upon it. It offers no handholds with which to 'grasp' it and reduce it to a concept. In English we literally speak of *grasping* something with our minds, of grasping a concept. Interesting, isn't it? We don't let the concept get to know us, or permeate us, or we don't feel our way into it with darkened mind. There's a similar aggression in the word 'get', and 'grab'. People talk about grabbing lunch or grabbing a coffee.... It can be a bit of a shock when we notice the almost violent colonizing impulse in our language.

So, this Mu lets you into the silence, the vast silence inside and out. The unbroken, undivided, inconceivable from which you and I come forth endlessly. Right now, this very moment, we are coming forth from this silence as all matter, all being.

Instead of 'knowing' this self, this world, this being... to be sitting with Mu is to be sitting as this question, "What is this?", which is inseparable from "Who is this?". And we do so with the understanding that the response that comes in its own time lies way beyond "Yes" or "No", beyond life and death, beyond pure and stained, beyond holy and profane. The Heart Sutra makes this clear to us every single morning, when we recite it.

Zhazhou would have been very old, somewhere between the ages of about eighty and a hundred and nineteen, when he breathed this response into us. His dates are 778 to 897, so as you can see this is Tang Dynasty, classical era, the golden age of Zen. Extraordinary masters at that time, he was a great one of the rising wave of this powerful practice. As I've sometimes mentioned, it arose in the presence of a great disruption in China that happened a few years before his birth – the An Lushan rebellion that cascaded into the collapse of the social order and the massive loss of life that followed that, way beyond even the death rate of World War I. And, so, he's in the aftermath, the shockwaves of absorbing and moving to repair a social space with some sustainable coherence. He gradually matured to become the offer of an infinite resilience.

At the age of eighteen he became the student of Nanquan who, many of you will have encountered in other cases. The Record of Zhaozhou starts out in a wonderful series of about twenty fascinating and often highly playful encounter dialogues between Nanquan and Zhaozhou. In the first year of his very sincere practice with Nanquan he had a radical enlightenment experience – and then for the next forty odd years, he stayed on, to polish his understanding, or allow it to become slowly more luminous. When he was close to 60, his teacher died – and yet he stayed on another couple of years, to carry out the funerary rites and tend the grave of his teacher, before setting off on pilgrimage for another twenty years of wandering on pilgrimage, moving from monastery to monastery, or temple to temple, and making himself completely available to be seen into by whoever he met on the way.

It was said that if he came upon a seven-year-old child with deeper understanding than his own he would sit down and study with her... And if he came upon a hundred-year-old person who was not yet clear, he would sit down and work to awaken that person.

He finally was convinced by people to take up a decrepit and slightly broken-down old temple in the town of Zhaozhou -- from which he took his name as time went on and people began arriving to learn from the little old master. And that was where his teaching life finally unfolded for the next almost forty years.

So -- what an extraordinary life. He lived very humbly and frugally in that temple.... even to the point of refusing repairs. He looked towards more important things than that. It was said that a light played around his mouth when he spoke. And he was known as the old Buddha. Not just because he was so old, but because he was timelessly just that -- a Buddha. Homegrown and complete. And he didn't teach with shouts and blows. The remarkable thing about the record of Zhaozhou is how, when he encounters a questioner, the question is so comprehensively met it knocks you off your feet; it may not look like an exacting and direct response to the question, but luckily that just means you have to find your own way in to sharing the compassionate and unswerving clear mind of Zhaozhou, meanwhile fully meeting the unnamed questioner as well -- that's how delicate, how nuanced and how minutely exact is the way that his response meets the person.

So it's impossible not to love him and I do. My job is to let you love him too. And you will love him when Mu opens to you, because when it does you share the marvelous mind of Zhaozhou when he said "Mu". Turns out, he said it to you.

Ikkyu, the 14th century Japanese eccentric, poet, monk who some of you will know, said this lovely thing: *"The wise know nothing at all, well, maybe one song"*. The wise know nothing at all -- this of course is the prajna paramita, itself; the wisdom of emptiness, the undividedness of the universe. Then he grants us one tiny concession, "Well, maybe one song".

And what a song! Have a look at the night sky before you go to bed! So what is that one song? Can you detect it? Is Mu one song no self is singing in all of us, all the time? And if we quieten down enough in zazen and practice, we cannot miss it, as it never goes away. It is deeply familiar, and is the one that our Zen tradition is singing up in us all the time.

There is another word very close to Mu -- 'Myo', meaning subtle, also dark, also mysterious, hard to see with the knowing mind. The word dark doesn't mean clouded or

blind it means no longer picking and choosing, no longer clinging to separating out things or beings into boxes, and keeping firm control of the lid to the box. This 'dark' is merciful blindness to 'self' and 'other', it is the eye of insight, wide awake in that dark.

So when we say the words of Xitou which we in *Taking Part in the Gathering*, consider the beautiful opening two lines: "*The mysterious source of the bright is clear and unstained. Branches of light stream from that dark*". The source darkness is clear, transparent to all that is -- and unstained, the mud of picking and choosing can't stick to it. That's where we're heading when we speak of "not knowing" -- a clarity of insight born in direct encounter with the original (originating) darkness from which we mysteriously emerge. No way to tie that down. Was it just at the beginning of our gestation, or our parents' gestations, or all the way back to the first amoeba that divided, or all the way back to the big bang, or to the singularity beyond which we cannot see? Let's call it intimacy, for it is always utterly ready to take you home, far beyond or before the ridge of pinpoint-able time. It is the dark from which *this* comes forth, everything you can see with your eyes right now comes forth from that dark, now and now and now. It is the dark from which you continuously flow, immediate and complete at all points. So, when we say branches of light Xitou is speaking of form -- of you, me, this, each thing. Those are the branches of light streaming from that dark, continuously.

Ikkyu once more - he wrote of the moment of his powerful awakening happened, when lying in the dark in a small boat on Lake Biwa, meditating or even less than meditating.... Then a crow cried across the lake, and shattered him into completeness from which he never fully recovered.

*Hearing a crow with no mouth
Cry in the deep darkness of the night,
I feel a longing for my father before he was born.*

Now, the crow with no mouth -- there's no problem with that surely? After all the Heart Sutra every morning hears us say, 'No eye, ear, nose, tongue, body, mind'. So the crow with

no mouth is immediately approachable. At that moment there's no crow, no cry, no Ikkyu, no boat, no lake, no ripples, no dark. There's also water lapping against the side of that little boat, beyond doubt, and an astounded human heart. When he says, "I feel a longing for my father before he was born", he touches the yearning that lies inside the Original Face koan, "What is your original face before even your parents were born".

So that longing, let yourselves feel it. Understand that that longing longs to wake up in you. It is the longing to touch the very source of your being, which is deep, deeply mysterious and will always be so. But the intimacy with that mystery is open to you, a deeper intimacy, an ever-deepening intimacy with that mystery.

There is nowhere it is not vividly apparent. Yet, in working with the Original Face koan, it felt for me a little like tracking a river all the way to the point where it tapers to a tiny stream, and then a trickle and then just moist moss, and then and then, if you found a spring, if you could get inside that spring and look all the way up to the very source of the source of the source, it'd be very dark and rightly so, and rightly so.

This is not something amenable to discursive understanding. I'll say it again, I've said it before, as Robert Aiken said, "We are not here to clear the mystery up" -- to pin it out and lay it bare and then possibly use a laser pointer to isolate this bit, that bit, this bit of the mystery. Instead, "We are here to make the mystery clear" - clarified like that darkness Xitou brings forth, our hearts clear and therefore utterly at rest.

That longing in Ikkyu is for the most profound rest of the heart. It's poignant, it's human, it's us, the one song, no self. Luckily, crows don't have crows any more than dogs have dogs. And there is that lovely Len Anderson poem that contains the teaching of Crow:

the squawking crow flies down
from the Redwood tree
to tell me he is
not a crow
not bird,
not passerine bird of the family corvadi

not nor mind,
nor body,
nor thing
and not a crow

in fact he says
he hasn't even been discovered yet

when I was young I dreamed I climbed marble stairs
towards a room that held the book of what each thing is
golden light poured down those stairs
from a room so high I could never see it
from that book I would learn what is crow
what is redwood, what am I

crow tells me
the black of his wings
is deeper than any book

friends, there are hours I have
no greater grief
no greater joy

I will never know what I am
crow flies down often to tell me so

The sound of a bird can wake you up. It is one with all that is here. We sit here with our eyes veiled and our hearts open and sound has a chance to reach us before thought can

jump up and that unrepeatable, original sound become identified or named or claimed or liked or not liked... to interrupt the direct transmission of reality.

You could actually say our 'knowing' minds are geared constantly to interrupt and filter out the complete transmission of reality that every sound faithfully brings to realize as you. So make your whole body an ear, open to the world of sound. The power of sound to awaken your heart is that sound comes empty handed, and with true weight of that silence I was speaking of at the start. Every sound realizes silence, the feel and weight and gift of silence.

There was a monk who finally gave away the whole idea of learned commentaries and finding the answer in just the right book. Years of sweating practice had left him high and dry, an exile to his own life. Finally, he gave up all effort and vowed to live out his life as the one who tended the tomb of an old teacher, and he took up residence there and devoted himself to caring for the grave. As many of you know, at a certain moment, just doing his humble daily task of sweeping the grave, a little loose pebble was kind enough to abandon its place of contented rest, travel through the air, and strike a stalk of the bamboo nearby, and say "tok!".

And that one "tok", was fortunately one "tok" too many. Nothing could engineer his lucky 'tok', that confirmed the silence of Mind. That monk wrote:

A single 'tok', all prior knowledge forgotten -
this is not the result of practice.
Daily activities proclaim the ancient way.
No more falling into passive stillness,
Wherever I go, I leave no trace.
In all situations my actions are free.
Everywhere, Masters of the Way
speak of this as the highest function.

Some people felt he *proclaimed* a little too much here at the end – still picking and choosing, possibly needing just one more TOK?... But isn't that more picking and choosing too? Put that aside. Just investigate that ripened state that he clearly was in for that one tiny sound to reach him and find nothing in the way.

That ripened state is worth embodying. It is not something you can wrench open in yourself – like trying to wrench open the tiny, tight little buds coming out of the hard wood in the trees out there, on their way to becoming flowers. If tried to dig the flower out...a travesty. One the grasping mind might fail to see in the light of ...those tiny, tiny buds.

In one of Zhaozhou's first encounters with Nanquan, he asked him "How should I direct myself?" and Nanquan said, "When you direct yourself, you deviate." Why? Why would directing yourself be wandering off the very path, that lies straight ahead under your actual feet in each breath? When you 'direct yourself', do you not create a solid self -- directed, programmed, an almost weaponized self? Hoping to force the bud to flower? This is how Ikkyu embodied the ripening process. Listen for all the *silence* in it:

flowers are silent silence is silent the mind is a silent flower the silent flower of the world opens.

Notice it's not the silent flower of the mind that opens, it's the silent flower of the world that opens *as* this very mind. So sitting with Mu is a long, deep communing with the most silent part of your being, always at rest. The one that does not have and after a while does not *wish* to have conceptual tools or strategies or plans or bargains to make in terms of engaging with this deep mystery of who we are, what this is. After a while, the longing becomes more nameless, more impossible to channel or direct or anything else, it just *is* -- like that longing for my father before he was even born. The longing for the disappearing point of the mystery that we are. The longing to be completely intimate with *this*.

Inside that silence is a very deep inquiry. *Who is this? What is this?* And as long as there's still breathing happening in a body those questions never come to something called 'an end'. They only open, more and more deeply.

We sit here together holding this live silence for each other. And we do it to strip off the weight of all of this knowing. Or is it fearing this knowing? Some kind of subtle, relentless anxiety? That is a weight. That is a defensive posture of some kind, a nameless tension. A sense of almost anything but this, almost *anything* rather than what is here. That's the knowing that traps the self inside a box, sealed unit, the dream of a self that needs defending, threatening itself with death. That is what Mu is here to soften and to soften and to soften, until it just falls away. Hard to imagine then how it was ever even wanted. What strange dream was that?

Or do we find we have, even more poignantly, been threatening ourselves with life! So, please offer yourselves to this not knowing, to the true intimacy of your being. You can trust that all things arise, in this intimacy, constantly, completely themselves, fresh, uncontrived, unencumbered, available. All possibilities exist here. Dare to offer yourself to this profound move to embrace the dark of not knowing. It is your life, waiting for you, and the deep, originating matter of sesshin.

<https://soundcloud.com/zen-open-circle/teisho-1-yes-we-have-no-bananas-intimate-in-the-dark?in=zen-open-circle/sets/spring-sesshin-2018>