



# Ordinary Mind Zen

## BEYOND US AND THEM

*Wu-Tsu's Who is that Other?*

### *THE CASE*

*Wu-Tsu said, "Sakyamuni and Maitreya are servants of another. Tell me, who is that other?"*

### *WU-MEN'S COMMENT*

*If you can see this other and distinguish him or her clearly, then it is like encountering your father at the crossroads. You will not need to ask somebody whether or not you're right.*

### *WU-MEN'S VERSE*

*Don't draw another's bow;*

*Don't ride another's horse;*

*Don't discuss another's faults;*

*Don't explore another's affairs.*



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My reading of this Koan is that goes to the heart of our Zen practice: that is, it asks the question, how do we integrate our understanding of the oneness and interdependence of life, which we discover in Zazen, with how we conduct ourselves in our everyday life embedded as it is in wealth, gender, race, age, sexuality, and ability differences? That is, when we come down from the mountain of Oneness, how do we conduct ourselves in our relationships with our partners, our families, our friends, our work colleagues and indeed, with the homeless person on the street? So, who is that other? Who am I? The quintessential Zen question.

**Difference in the form of the other is often experienced as a threat.** In Zen practice, we can easily err on the side of oneness. Many of the classical Koans speak of the dangers of getting “stuck in emptiness”. In more contemporary language we might describe this as using oneness to deny difference or transcend difference. For example, we might use the pursuit of oneness to secretly bypass our own emotional pain or to avoid the messiness of intimate relationships in pursuit of equanimity or tranquillity dressed up as nirvana. It can get pretty annoying when someone in distress disturbs our tranquil sitting! We might think secretly - I want to stay on top of this flag pole! Leave me alone!



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However, before Zen practice, most people err on the side of difference. That is, they are stuck in duality or separateness. There's "I" and there's "you". There's "us" and there's "them". There is occupational identity, racial identity, gender identity, sexuality identity. In Zen practice we see difference through the eye of oneness; and oneness through the eye of difference.

Let us start with the "other" as seen through the lens of difference, because this is the way we are conditioned to perceive the world. Not only are we conditioned culturally, we are also wired biologically, through the process of evolution, to be wary of strangers. Therefore, we all start life from the position of perceiving anyone outside of our family (assuming our family is safe) as the other, as a stranger we need to be a little wary of – that is, they are a potential threat. This is particularly the case when the "other" is from a different culture, especially if they have a different coloured skin. They look different. Not only are they a stranger, but they are also a foreigner – the word "barbarian" – comes from the Latin prefix for beard – "barba". Bodhidharma was a red-bearded barbarian. He also showed no diffidence to social hierarchy as witnessed in his famous dialogue with the Emperor:



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*The emperor spoke to him as follows: “Since I’ve assumed the throne I’ve built temples and written about scriptures, plus I’ve brought about the ordination of an incalculable number of monks. What merit does this activity have?”*

*Bodhidharma replied, “No merit whatsoever.”*

*The emperor then asked, “Why does this have no merit?”*

*Bodhidharma said, “These are matters of small consequence in the affairs of men and gods that are caused by transgressions. It’s like shadows chasing form, nothing real about it.”*

*The emperor then asked, “What is genuine merit?”*

*Bodhidharma said, “Pure wisdom of sublime perfection, experiencing one’s solitary emptiness, seeking nothing in the world”.*

*The emperor then asked: “What is the first principle of the holy truth?”*

*Bodhidharma said, “Across the vastness (of the universe), nothing holy.”*

*The emperor said, “Who is facing me?”*

*Bodhidharma said, “I don’t know.”*



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Bodhidharma points to the naked Self that is not dependent on which clothes we wear - whether we are rich or poor, male or female, black or white – so in this dialogue Bodhidharma is expressing the realisation of Oneness or Equality.

Unfortunately, we have a situation in the country in which I live, much like other parts of the world, where politicians (unlike Bodhidharma) don't use the language of our common humanity but instead use the language of fear of the other, fear of difference, to get elected. Over the past 15 years some politicians in Australia have used the surge of refugees and the growth of Terrorism to create a climate of fear, fostering the view that Australian borders are being swamped by the arrivals of thousands of “illegal immigrants” or “boat people”, whereas in fact they are nearly all proved to be genuine refugees when they are processed. The politicians dress up their cultivation of xenophobia as compassion, arguing they are acting to save people from drowning, dismissing the desperation people must be in to risk the fate of drowning, rather than stay in their country of origin. It is rather an intentional and determined practice of exclusion, of compartmentalisation into camps demarcated by barbed wire, originally in the deserts of Australia and now in the enforced deportation to countries



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like Papua New Guinea and Cambodia, where they have to remain in these with the knowledge they will never be resettled in Australia.

Fear of strangers, fear of the other, we've all at times experienced in-groups and out-groups, at school, or at work. This is a fear that operates on both an individual and a collective level and it's seen at its ugliest in the form of Fascism. Unfortunately this is the reality of the world we live in today.

It's a "them and us" world.

## HOSPITALITY TOWARDS STRANGERS

**Hospitality towards strangers is a cultural practice that seeks to recognise the face of ourselves in the other.** Fear of the other, of difference, has been around since the dawn of humanity. Never quite sure if that other clan was going trade with us or kill us. Fortunately, in response to this fear, many ancient cultures developed a practice of showing hospitality



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towards strangers. This is a practice of inclusion, of welcoming. It brings to mind this lovely

Haiku by Issa:

*In the cherry blossom's  
shade  
there is no such thing  
as a stranger.*

This was very striking in New Zealand, when I was successful in applying for a therapy job in a community agency. The Maori people have traditionally practiced this ritual of hospitality to strangers and it has been incorporated into the contemporary culture of New Zealand. It is a beautiful welcoming ceremony, and on my first day at work both me and my wife Annie were sung onto the hallowed ground (of the office) where the Maori members of the group we were joining, narrated to us their story about their mountain and river, that is the place that they identified as home; and then we were also invited to do the same – which we did, singing one of our songs from our first album in Scottish Gaelic, followed, of course, by the sharing of a meal together. By the end of the afternoon we were no longer strangers. Showing hospitality to strangers is a beautiful custom that exists in many cultures and is what helps to make us feel part of one big human family.



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It is a practice that is saying on a deep level, that although we are different, we are basically the same. Even though you have different coloured skin and wear different clothing to me, I recognise your face as a familiar face. We can also take this further, and recognise the sameness that we share with all life forms on this planet – this vast tapestry of mutual interdependence.

**It is also true of course that we can be strangers to ourselves: dissociated memory fragments, intense feelings of loss that have been locked away, repressed sexualities.**

Unwanted feelings from childhood traumas, that were too overwhelming to bear, compartmentalised within internal fences.

If we have faith, and persist in this practice that we share, this practice of just sitting, of being just this moment, gradually, we are able to experience that which we couldn't previously tolerate. This is the process of becoming intimate with the strangers within ourselves, the hurt child within, recognising and welcoming the parts of ourselves we have previously excluded and also grieving the love we didn't receive. The Buddha sings and the Buddha weeps. As Joko Beck said:



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*When we maintain awareness, **whether we know it or not**, healing is taking place ... a door that has been shut begins to open ... As the door opens, we see that the present is absolute and that, in a sense, the whole universe begins right now, in each second.*

**The language of servants and masters reminds of social hierarchy premised on deeply held beliefs of superiority and inferiority.** So, returning to the case. Who, is that other, that Sakyamuni and Maitreya are both servants of? Are we not all servants of another? Do we have a choice? What is the consequence if we are not servants of another? The Koan tells us we are SERVANTS, not MASTERS. Please don't read servant as slave. We are not speaking of enforced servitude nor of self-sacrifice. We are not talking about the Master-Slave relationship. To be a servant is to provide service to who? Who is it that we bow down to when we face the altar every time we come to this beautiful Zendo?

This Koan therefore asks us to examine our relationships to everything and every person we meet in the course of our daily activity. How do we relate to each other? Are we welcoming? How do we relate to our colleagues at work? Are we understanding? How do we relate to ourselves? Are we kind?



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Or would we rather be the Lord and Master, of ourselves and others? Do we wish to control or serve? If we do wish to serve, how best do we serve ourselves and others? How do we care for ourselves and others? How do we give ourselves and others compassion?

**Wu-men's comment:**

*If you can see this other and distinguish him or her clearly, then it is like encountering your father at the crossroads. You will not need to ask somebody whether or not you're right.*

Do you recognise him or her? Wu-men tells us that if you recognise this other it will be like seeing the face of your father or mother. Whose face did you see when you were born? Who held you in their arms, smiling, gently rocking you into the world? Can you remember? Wu-men says when you recognise this other you will no longer have any doubts. No one will need to confirm it for you, you will know it for yourself. You will see your ORIGINAL FACE right there, in the mirror of your mind!



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Donald Winnicott, the British paediatrician and psychoanalyst famously said, THERE IS NO SUCH THING AS A BABY, THERE IS A BABY AND SOMEONE. Who, is this “someone”?

We now know that a self is born in the intimate dance between the infant and the primary care giver, usually the mother. We come to know ourselves through the face of THE M/OTHER - our self is born through the thousands of affect regulating micro interactions that go on between the infant and the mother on a daily basis. Mutual eye gazing, being picked up and held when we cry, prosody. Depending on the quality of the response, if it’s sensitive and consistent, the baby becomes securely attached. We are dyadic beings from the get go. The self is always a “self-other”. And we take this relational template into our adulthood.

So, when we look into the eyes of our beloved, who do we see? Apparently, Joko use to use an eye gazing exercise on sesshins. I came across a similar exercise when I did a personal growth program in Sydney called “The Forum”, many years ago. I gazed into the eyes of a stranger for quite a long time – initially it can be quite anxiety provoking. But eventually, what do we see? The eye gazing exercise was also replicated by the performance artist Maria



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Abramovich, who sat in the MOMA New York City for three months gazing into the face of each person who waited for hours for the opportunity to sit with her. How intimate!

We are all one and we are different. I can never be in your body and you can never be in mine, but we are all part of the one universal body and mind.

**In the concluding verse, Wu-man advises us:**

***Don't draw another's bow;***

***Don't ride another's horse;***

***Don't discuss another's faults;***

***Don't explore another's affairs.***

After recognising our self in the face of this other, Wu-men tells us we will no longer wish or strive to be *someone other than who we already are*. In fact, we realise that we have always been and always will be that which we are. Right now! We don't have a choice – we don't even have to try! Like my teacher, Barry Magid says, when doing Zazen our face naturally



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appears – you can't do it right or wrong! There is no right or wrong when we let go of the mind road of constant judgment and evaluation.

So, in whatever activity we are doing, we do it wholeheartedly our way – no one else can do it our way even if it's been done a million times before! When I first started on my journey as a Zen teacher, I was worried that, it's all been said before, there is nothing original I have to say – but then I realised – it's not what is said necessarily, but WHO is saying it and WHO is listening to it – this could be the day when even though you've heard this said a thousand times – something shifts. Speaking and listening to a dharma talk is a live performance. We can hear the recorded version, but there is something special about witnessing a live performance because we are here together sharing a moment in time which will never be repeated. We know that it can never be lived again.

**Sunsets and sunrises have a special place in our hearts - they remind us of the world turning, a new birth and death.** When we were living in New Zealand a few years ago, I met a Japanese business man who had lost his only child to cancer. Now I don't know if this



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is somehow related to Japanese culture, or whether it was his own unique ritual, but after his son's funeral he sold his business and migrated to New Zealand, and for one whole year, he continuously travelled up and down the two islands taking photographs of sunsets and sunrises. He told me how this ritual helped him go through the grieving process.

Sunsets and sunrises are such beautiful expressions of transience as you see change happening before your eyes, moment by moment, *whereas change is often much slower so as to be imperceptible* - we don't witness it directly – until one day it suddenly hits us. This can be a positive or a negative experience. I remember once when I hadn't seen an old high school friend for years and then seeing his face when we met at the airport and being initially shocked at how much he had aged and realising that I too must have aged in the same way only it was happening so slowly I missed it. I guess one day we all wake up and look in the mirror and go – oh my gosh! – who is this old wo/man in the mirror! Is this my face? Or, is it everyone's face? Or as James Joyce called it, “Here Comes Everybody”!



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**I have spoken of the dangers of only seeing the world of differentiation and not the world of oneness, but there is also the danger of being so immersed in oneness that we forget to respect differentiation.** We have to come back down from the darkness of the mountain top, into the sunlight of everyday life and make our home there, conducting ourselves with ease and grace.

Leonard Cohen learned this following Japanese poem from his Teacher, Joshu Sasaki Roshi, who died this year (2014) aged 107:

*Husband and wife drinking tea*

*Your smile, my smile*

*Your tears, my tears.*

It is a beautiful expression of oneness and unity in an intimate relationship. But I also quote it as a cautionary tale, to remind us that we have to walk simultaneously in *both* worlds of oneness and differentiation. It is true, from the perspective of oneness, your tears *are* my



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tears, but that doesn't mean your body is *my* body – where oneness turns into unwanted sexual advances. Unfortunately (or fortunately), we have heard so much in recent years about this shadow side of Buddhism, because this oneness business can get pretty tricky in a Teacher-Student relationship, especially in a residential setting. Where the Teacher seems to radiate specialness – and the sense that he's got it and I haven't.

Every relationship needs an ability to balance togetherness and separateness. We need intimacy and we also need our separateness. Respect for difference. Respect for privacy. We are boundless and also have boundaries. The recognition that each partner to the relationship has different needs that need to be recognised and negotiated. When both partners meet each other as secure and autonomous, we practice our interdependence intelligently. We don't have to cling in the desire to merge, or in the fear of abandonment; and we don't have to avoid or distance ourselves out of fear of rejection or criticism. In a secure adult attachment relationship both partners can take turns at being the secure base for the other. This is reciprocity. Equal partners. Each taking turns at giving and receiving. Not one person doing all the giving and in the process neglecting their own needs. We use our experience of oneness to delight in the dance of difference. Each person, each flower, uniquely themselves.



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So, as Wu-men says in his verses: Don't draw another's bow; and, don't ride another's horse; just be yourself. He also says,

Don't discuss another's faults; and don't explore another's affairs. Respect their privacy and confidentiality and separateness. They don't need to conform to our expectations. If they come and ask for help, then we can respond with compassion. And if they don't ask for help, we can still respond with compassion.

So, I would like to conclude with a quote from the last chapter of Herman Hesse's classic 1922 novel called *Siddhartha* – many of you probably read it, as I did, when you were younger. We started this discussion with the question: Who is that other? I talked about how the self develops in that intimate dance between the faces of the infant and the mother. The psychoanalyst and neuroscientist Alan Schore tells us that emotional communication is primarily non-verbal right hemisphere to right hemisphere using face and voice. Zen itself talks about face to face transmission going right back to the mythical scene represented in Case 6 of the Gateless Barrier, *The World Honoured One Twirls a Flower*. This is the scene where Sakyamuni holds up a flower to the assembly of monks as the full and complete



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presentation, and only one of the monks, Mahakasyapa smiles and hence receives transmission, establishing the foundational myth of Zen as “A special transmission outside tradition – not established on words or letters.” In this final chapter, Hesse describes the concluding scene of the story, where Govinda, who is now a senior Buddhist monk, but who is still seeking, once again meets up with his old friend Siddhartha, who is now the Ferry Man. In this moment of meeting, Govinda has the following experience:

“He no longer saw his friend Siddhartha’s face; instead he saw other faces, many, a long row, a streaming river of faces, hundreds, thousands, which all came and faded, and yet seemed all to be there at once, which kept changing and being renewed, and yet which were all Siddhartha ... “

[This text is a reworking of a Dharma Talk given on the 4/10/14 at the Ordinary Mind Zendo, New York].