

Encountering the Gateless Gate

The paradox of enlightenment, says Stephan Bodian, is also the answer.

Stephan Bodian Summer 2008 Tricycle

The paradoxical dance of seeking and finding wears different costumes in different traditions. In Zen it's usually known as the gateless gate: Until you crack the combination and pass through, you can't fully understand the meaning of the great Zen teachings—but then all your mental effort inevitably proves fruitless before this enigmatic and impenetrable barrier. You need to bring your whole being, not just your mind, to the process and allow the paradox to transform you from the inside. Many Zen koans pose some version of this paradox, disorienting the mind and evoking an answer from another dimension of knowing.

Consider the well-known Mahayana teaching: All beings are inherently enlightened, but because of their attachments and distorted views they can't realize this fact. I can still remember how these words short-circuited my mind the first time I heard them. Hmm, I mused, if we can't realize it, then how can we possibly say we're enlightened? But if we're really enlightened, why can't we realize it?

As a neophyte practitioner, I understood these words to mean that deep down inside me there was this enlightened nature that I somehow needed to discover and meditation was a kind of excavation project designed to unearth it. For years I kept digging, sitting intensive retreats, contemplating koans, emptying my mind to make room for the influx of awakening. I was spurred on in this archaeological exploration by my teachers, who offered encouragement in private interviews and lavished authority and cachet on those who passed koans quickly. Eventually I just wore myself out with the digging, so I set aside my shovel (and my monk's robes) and went back to living a more ordinary life. Yet the paradox continued to gnaw at me, silently, from the inside.

The fact is, once you're gripped by the core paradox and recognize that consensus—that everyday reality is merely a reflection of some deeper truth that's close at hand but hidden from view—you've embarked on a search that you can never really abandon, no matter how far you seem to stray. The Zen masters say that encountering the paradox is like swallowing a red-hot iron ball you can neither disgorge nor pass through. Until you digest this ball, you can never be completely at peace.

Throughout the centuries zealous Zen students have meditated long hours struggling to resolve this paradox, only to return home and discover their "original face." In the Rinzai Zen tradition, practitioners bellow mu (the key word from one of the most important koans) for hours in their fervor to break through the gate, and the tradition's stories are filled with notable examples of those who took their practice to even greater extremes, standing in the snow for hours, sitting at the edge of a precipice, walking on foot from master to master.

"Monasteries are places for desperate people," my first Zen teacher used to say, by which he meant people whose suffering, urgency, or intensity drives them forward on their long and often lonely search.

Many centuries ago, the Persian mystic poet Rumi described his own divine desperation in these words:

*I have lived on the lip
of insanity, wanting to know reasons,
knocking on a door. It opens.
I've been knocking from the inside!*

Judging from this poem, Rumi struggled for a long time to penetrate the paradox with his mind, but the door eventually opens by itself, almost in spite of his efforts, and reveals that he's been living in the secret chamber all along. Rumi's epiphany when he discovers that he's been looking from the inside out mirrors the surprise, relief, and delight of those seekers who wear themselves out attempting to unravel the paradox and drop to the ground, exhausted—only to discover that they've never strayed from home, even in their most desperate moments. "No creature ever falls short of its own completeness," says Zen master Dogen. "Wherever it stands it does not fail to cover the ground."

Needless to say, this intense longing to crack the code and reveal the truth at the heart of reality is as ancient and universal as humankind itself. You could say that it's in our DNA. According to the Sufis, God said to the Prophet Muhammad, "I am a hidden treasure, and I want to be known." In His yearning to be loved and experienced, God set in motion an evolutionary pattern that reached its pinnacle in the human capacity for spiritual awakening. God, or Truth, in other words, is seeking to awaken to itself through you, to see itself everywhere through your eyes and taste itself everywhere through your lips. "That which you are seeking," wrote an anonymous sage, "is always seeking you."

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