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Joko Beck and the Thought of Enlightenment

United States, 20th c.

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Query:

Story:

Joko Beck had finished a talk, and asked if there were any questions. A young man raised his hand and bluntly asked, "Are you enlightened?"

Her response was immediate. Laughing, she said, "I hope I should never have such a thought!"

Response by Peg Syverson

I have thought about this exchange many times over the years since I first witnessed it. I had not been studying with Joko very long, and everything she said surprised me. The young man in this encounter is like the professor in the story of Nan-in serving tea. Nan-in, a 19th century Japanese Zen master, was visited by a university professor who came to inquire about Zen. Nan-in politely served his guest, pouring tea into his cup until it was filled to the brim. He continued pouring, overflowing the cup, until the professor finally said, "It is overfull! No more will go in!"

“Like this cup,” said Nan-in, “you are full of your own opinions and speculations. How can I show you Zen unless you first empty your cup?”

The young Zen student in this story seemed to be asking Joko a question, but his head was already filled with his own opinions and speculations about “enlightenment.” He was no doubt wondering: “Can this teacher really help me? Can I trust her? Does she have any credentials?” So much is bound up in the student’s simple question. “Who should I follow? Who can help me get enlightened?”

Of course it is important to have discernment when we work with a teacher. Still, beyond the issue of qualification or capacity is the nature of the relationship itself. Joko’s playful, humorous response changed the entire field of her relationship with this student, and in fact with everyone listening. But it opens to a much deeper mystery. As I heard Joko’s response I marveled at her words, and I still do. They echo the renegade Zen master Ikkyu: “I don’t remember making a mistake called enlightenment.”

My own encounters with Joko were just as unexpected and penetrating. Early in our work together, when I was a single parent juggling three jobs and a full-time graduate program, she asked me what had brought me to practice. I knew that this was not a casual question. For weeks I reflected on it, and finally I came in for *daisan* (private practice interview), met her piercing gaze, and said,

truthfully, “I just want to be a better mother for my son.” She tartly replied, “Well, that’s a story!”

I was startled into wonder, and for just a bit, completely lost my bearings. I barely managed to stand, bow, and leave the little room where she was even then ringing the bell for the next student. I felt as though she had suddenly tossed a pitcher of ice water in my face.

But at some level beyond language, I knew she was right. My “story” was suddenly quite clear: the core belief that I was perpetually failing at some performance of “being a good mother,” despite having neither models nor even any idea what such an ideal might be. No, I was always just coming up short, always scrambling to improve, and still failing. In fact, deep in my heart, I held this lacerating belief as a virtue—a sign of both my noble aspiration and the humble recognition of my terrible failings. It was poignant and heartbreaking. Yet, this very story was actually coming between my son Ben and me, a filter through which I was always anxiously and apologetically and sadly viewing our marvelous life together. That single retort in Joko’s tiny daisan room changed the entire course of my relationship with Ben. Simply staying present with him without the story was infinitely more challenging, and yet the intimacy it opened was vast and luminous.

We live with a yearning for something always just out of reach. Without it, we would never come to practice Zen in the first

place. We have many ideas about our practice, about ourselves, and about the world. Our cup is full. Like every other inexperienced Zen student, I was striving to be awakened. I wanted to be a light in the world, to have the genuine insight, true compassion, and profound wisdom to offer something truly needed—care for others that was *real* care. There is nothing wrong with a heartfelt aspiration for awakening, of course. But, *I hope I should never have such a thought?* The ringing clarity of her words illuminates our secret agenda, our constant negotiations, calculations, and manipulations, our efforts to finesse *life as it is*, and reveals our hidden longing for enlightenment as ultimate comfort, confirmation, achievement, or holiness. The demolition of this self-centered dream is the revelation of the true path.