

Flowers of Wu

20 koans from The Gateless Gate

by Chinese Ch'an master Wu-men Hui-hai

English Translation

By late Zen master Katsuki Sekida (Two Zen Classics 26-137)

from :

<http://www.sacred-texts.com/bud/zen/mumonkan.htm>

The original Chinese text is taken from the following Japanese web site:

<http://homepage1.nifty.com/poem-club/mumonkan/mumonkanwoyomu.htm>

Mumon's Preface

Buddhism makes mind its foundation and no-gate its gate.

Now, how do you pass through this no-gate?

It is said that things coming in through the gate can never be your own treasures. What is gained from external circumstances will perish in the end. However, such a saying is already raising waves when there is no wind. It is cutting unblemished skin.

As for those who try to understand through other people's words, they are striking at the moon with a stick; scratching a shoe, whereas it is the foot that itches. What concern have they with the truth?

In the summer of the first year of Jōtei, Ekai was in Ryūshō Temple and as head monk worked with the monks, using the cases of the ancient masters as brickbats to batter the gate and lead them on according to their respective capacities.

The text was written down not according to any scheme, but just to make a collection of forty-eight cases.

It is called *Mumonkan*, "The Gateless Gate."

A man of determination will unflinchingly push his way straight forward, regardless of all dangers. Then even the eight-armed Nata cannot hinder him. Even the four sevens of the West and the two threes of the East would beg for their lives. If one has no determination, then it will be like catching a glimpse of a horse galloping past the window: in the twinkling of an eye it will be gone.

Verse

The Great Way is gateless,
Approached in a thousand ways.
Once past this checkpoint
You stride through the universe.

1. Jōshū's "Mu"

Case 1 of the WMG/MMK

A monk asked Jōshū, "Has a dog the Buddha Nature?" Jōshū answered, "Mu."

Mumon's Comment

In order to master Zen, you must pass the barrier of the patriarchs. To attain this subtle realization, you must completely cut off the way of thinking.

If you do not pass the barrier, and do not cut off the way of thinking, then you will be like a ghost clinging to the bushes and weeds.

Now, I want to ask you, what is the barrier of the patriarchs?

Why, it is this single word "Mu." That is the front gate to Zen.

Therefore it is called the "Mumonkan of Zen."

If you pass through it, you will not only see Jōshū face to face, but you will also go hand in hand with the successive patriarchs, entangling your eyebrows with theirs, seeing with the same eyes, hearing with the same ears.

Isn't that a delightful prospect?

Wouldn't you like to pass this barrier?

Arouse your entire body with its three hundred and sixty bones and joints and its eighty-four thousand pores of the skin; summon up a spirit of great doubt and concentrate on this word "Mu."

Carry it continuously day and night. Do not form a nihilistic conception of vacancy, or a relative conception of "has" or "has not."

It will be just as if you swallow a red-hot iron ball, which you cannot spit out even if you try.

All the illusory ideas and delusive thoughts accumulated up to the present will be exterminated, and when the time comes, internal and external will be spontaneously united. You will know this, but for yourself only, like a dumb man who has had a dream.

Then all of a sudden an explosive conversion will occur, and you will astonish the heavens and shake the earth.

It will be as if you snatch away the great sword of the valiant general Kan'u and hold it in your hand. When you meet the Buddha, you kill him; when you meet the patriarchs, you kill them. On the brink of life and death, you command perfect freedom; among the sixfold worlds and four modes of existence, you enjoy a merry and playful samadhi.

Now, I want to ask you again, "How will you carry it out?"
Employ every ounce of your energy to work on this "Mu."
If you hold on without interruption, behold: a single spark, and the holy candle is lit!

Mumon's Verse

The dog, the Buddha Nature,
The pronouncement, perfect and final.
Before you say it has or has not,
You are a dead man on the spot.

2. The Buddha Holds Out a Flower

Case 6 of the WMG/MMK

When Shakyamuni Buddha was at Mount Grdhrakuta, he held out a flower to his listeners.

Everyone was silent.

Only Mahakasyapa broke into a broad smile.

The Buddha said, "I have the True Dharma Eye, the Marvelous Mind of Nirvana, the True Form of the Formless, and the Subtle Dharma Gate, independent of words and transmitted beyond doctrine. This I have entrusted to Mahakasyapa."

Mumon's Comment

Golden-faced Gautama really disregarded his listeners.

He made the good look bad and sold dog's meat labeled as mutton.

He himself thought it was wonderful.

If, however, everyone in the audience had laughed, how could he have transmitted his True Eye?

And again, if Mahakasyapa had not smiled, how could the Buddha have transmitted it?

If you say the True Dharma Eye can be transmitted, then the golden-faced old man would be a city slicker who cheats the country bumpkin.

If you say it cannot be transmitted, then why did the Buddha approve of Mahakasyapa?

Mumon's Verse

Holding out a flower,
The Buddha betrayed his curly tail.
Heaven and earth were bewildered,
At Mahakasyapa's smile.

3. Kashyapa's "Knock Down the Flagpole"

Case 22 of the WMG/MMK

Ananda asked Kashyapa, "The World-honored One gave you the golden robe; did he give you anything else?"

"Ananda!" cried Kashyapa.

"Yes, sir!" answered Ananda.

"Knock down the flagpole at the gate," said Kashyapa.

Mumon's Comment

If you can give a turning word at this point, you will see that the meeting at Mount Grdhakuta is still solemnly continuing.

If not, then this is what Vipasyin Buddha worried about from remote ages; up to now he has still not acquired the essence.

Mumon's Verse

Tell me—question or answer—which was more intimate?

Many have knit their brows over this;

Elder brother calls, younger brother answers, and they betray the family secret.

They had a special spring, not one of yin and yang.

4. Bodhidharma's Mind-Pacifying

Case 41 of the WMG/MMK

Bodhidharma sat facing the wall.

The Second Patriarch stood in the snow.

He cut off his arm and presented it to Bodhidharma, crying, "My mind has no peace as yet! I beg you, master, please pacify my mind!"

"Bring your mind here and I will pacify it for you," replied Bodhidharma.

"I have searched for my mind, and I cannot take hold of it," said the Second Patriarch.

"Now your mind is pacified," said Bodhidharma.

Mumon's Comment

The broken-toothed old Hindu came so importantly, thousands of miles over the sea.

This was raising waves where there was no wind.

In his last years he induced enlightenment in his disciple, who, to make matters worse, was defective in the six roots.

Why, Shasanro did not know for ideographs.

Mumon's Verse

Coming east, directly pointing,
You entrusted the Dharma, and trouble arose;
The clamor of the monasteries
Is all because of you.

5. Think Neither Good Nor Evil

Case 23 of the WMG/MMK

The Sixth Patriarch was pursued by the monk Myō as far as Taiyu Mountain.

The patriarch, seeing Myō coming, laid the robe and bowl on a rock and said, "This robe represents the faith; it should not be fought over. If you want to take it away, take it now."

Myō tried to move it, but it was as heavy as a mountain and would not budge. Faltering and trembling, he cried out, "I came for the Dharma, not for the robe.

I beg you, please give me your instruction."

The patriarch said, "Think neither good nor evil. At this very moment, what is the original self of the monk Myō?"

At these words, Myō was directly illuminated. His whole body was covered with sweat.

He wept and bowed, saying, "Besides the secret words and the secret meaning you have just now revealed to me, is there anything else, deeper still?"

The patriarch said, "What I have told you is no secret at all.

When you look into your own true self, whatever is deeper is found right there."

Myō said, "I was with the monks under Ōbai for many years but I could not realize my true self.

But now, receiving your instruction, I know it is like a man drinking water and knowing whether it is cold or warm. My lay brother, you are now my teacher."

The patriarch said, "If you say so, but let us both call Ōbai our teacher. Be mindful to treasure and hold fast to what you have attained."

Mumon's Comment

The Sixth Patriarch was, so to speak, hurried into helping a man in an emergency, and he displayed a grandmotherly kindness.

It is as though he peeled a fresh lichi, removed the seed, put it in your mouth, and asked you to swallow it down.

Mumon's Verse

You cannot describe it; you cannot picture it;
You cannot admire it; don't try to eat it raw.
Your true self has nowhere to hide;
When the world is destroyed, it is not destroyed.

6. The Sixth Patriarch's "Your Mind Moves"

Case 29 of the WMG/MMK

The wind was flapping a temple flag, and two monks started an argument.

One said the flag moved, the other said the wind moved;

they argued back and forth but could not reach a conclusion.

The Sixth Patriarch said, "It is not the wind that moves, it is not the flag that moves; it is your mind that moves."

The two monks were awe-struck.

Mumon's Comment

It is not the wind that moves; it is not the flag that moves; it is not the mind that moves. How do you see the patriarch?

If you come to understand this matter deeply, you will see that the two monks got gold when buying iron.

The patriarch could not withhold his compassion and courted disgrace.

Mumon's Verse

Wind, flag, mind, moving,
All equally to blame.
Only knowing how to open his mouth,
Unaware of his fault in talking.

7. Baso's "This Very Mind Is the Buddha"

Case 30 of the WMG/MMK

Daibai asked Baso, "What is the Buddha?"

Baso answered, "This very mind is the Buddha."

Mumon's Comment

If you directly grasp Baso's meaning, you wear the Buddha's clothes, eat the Buddha's food, speak the Buddha's words, do the Buddha's deeds—that is, you are a Buddha himself.

However, alas! Daibai misled not a few people into taking the mark on the balance for the weight itself.

How could he realize that even mentioning the word "Buddha" should make us rinse out our mouths for three days?

If a man of understanding hears anyone say, "This very mind is the Buddha," he will cover his ears and rush away.

Mumon's Verse

The blue sky and bright day,
No more searching around!
"What is the Buddha?" you ask:
With loot in your pocket, you declare yourself innocent.

8. Nansen's "Not Mind, Not Buddha, Not Things"

Case 27 of the WMG/MMK

A monk asked Nansen, "Is there any Dharma that has not been preached to the people?"

Nansen answered, "There is."

"What is the truth that has not been taught?" asked the monk.

Nansen said, "It is not mind; it is not Buddha; it is not things."

Mumon's Comment

At this question, Nansen used up all his treasure and was not a little confused.

Mumon's Verse

Talking too much spoils your virtue;

Silence is truly unequaled.

Let the mountains become the sea;

I'll give you no comment.

9. Keichû the Wheelmaker

Case 8 of the WMG/MMK

Gettan Oshō said, "Keichû, the first wheelmaker, made a cart whose wheels had a hundred spokes.

Now, suppose you took a cart and removed both the wheels and the axle. What would you have?"

Mumon's Comment

If anyone can directly master this topic, his eye will be like a shooting star, his spirit like a flash of lightning.

Mumon's Verse

When the spiritual wheels turn,
Even the master fails to follow them.
They travel in all directions, above and below,
North, south, east, and west.

10. Nansen's "Ordinary Mind Is the Way"

Case 19 of the WMG/MMK

Jōshū asked Nansen, "What is the Way?"

"Ordinary mind is the Way," Nansen replied.

"Shall I try to seek after it?" Jōshū asked.

"If you try for it, you will become separated from it," responded Nansen.

"How can I know the Way unless I try for it?" persisted Jōshū.

Nansen said, "The Way is not a matter of knowing or not knowing.

Knowing is delusion; not knowing is confusion.

When you have really reached the true Way beyond doubt, you will find it as vast and boundless as outer space.

How can it be talked about on the level of right and wrong?"

With these words, Jōshū came to a sudden realization.

Mumon's Comment

Nansen dissolved and melted away before Jōshū's question, and could not offer a plausible explanation.

Even though Jōshū comes to a realization, he must delve into it for another thirty years before he can fully understand it.

Mumon's Verse

The spring flowers, the autumn moon;
Summer breezes, winter snow.
If useless things do not clutter your mind,
You have the best days of your life.

11. Kyōgen's "Man up in a Tree"

case 5 of the WMG/MMK

Kyōgen Oshō said, "It is like a man up in a tree hanging from a branch with his mouth; his hands grasp no bough, his feet rest on no limb.

Someone appears under the tree and asks him, 'What is the meaning of Bodhidharma's coming from the West?' If he does not answer, he fails to respond to the question. If he does answer, he will lose his life.

What would you do in such a situation?"

Mumon's Comment

Even if your eloquence flows like a river, it is of no avail.

Though you can expound the whole of Buddhist literature, it is of no use.

If you solve this problem, you will give life to the way that has been dead until this moment and destroy the way that has been alive up to now.

Otherwise you must wait for Maitreya Buddha and ask him.

Mumon's Verse

Kyōgen is truly thoughtless;
His vice and poison are endless.
He stops up the mouths of the monks,
And devil's eyes sprout from their bodies.

12. Jōshū's Cypress

Case 37 of the WMG/MMK

A monk asked Jōshū, "What is the meaning of Bodhidharma's coming to China?"

Jōshū said, "A cypress in the garden."

Mumon's Comment

If you understand Jōshū's answer intimately, there is no Shakya before you, no Maitreya to come.

Mumon's Verse

Words cannot express things;
Speech does not convey the spirit.
Swayed by words, one is lost;
Blocked by phrases, one is bewildered.

13. Jōshū's "Wash Your Bowl"

Case 7 of the WMG/MMK

A monk said to Jōshū, "I have just entered this monastery.

« Please teach me.»

"Have you eaten your rice porridge?" asked Jōshū.

"Yes, I have," replied the monk.

"Then you had better wash your bowl," said Jōshū.

With this the monk gained insight.

Mumon's Comment

When he opens his mouth, Jōshū shows his gallbladder. He displays his heart and liver.

I wonder if this monk really did hear the truth. I hope he did not mistake the bell for a jar.

Mumon's Verse

Endeavoring to interpret clearly,
You retard your attainment.
Don't you know that flame is fire?
Your rice has long been cooked.

14. Unmon's "A dry shit-stick"

Case 21 of the WMG/MMK

A monk asked Unmon, "What is Buddha?"

Unmon replied, "A dry shit-stick."

Mumon's Comment

Unmon was too poor to prepare plain food, too busy to speak from notes.

He hurriedly took up *shiketsu* to support the Way.

The decline of Buddhism was thus foreshadowed.

Mumon's Verse

Lightning flashing,
Sparks shooting;
A moment's blinking,
Missed forever.

15. When the Bell Sounds

Case 16 of the WMG/MMK

Unmon said, "The world is vast and wide.

Why do you put on your seven-piece robe at the sound of the bell?"

Mumon's Comment

In studying Zen, you should not be swayed by sounds and forms.

Even though you attain insight when hearing a voice or seeing a form, this is simply the ordinary way of things.

Don't you know that the real Zen student commands sounds, controls forms, is clear-sighted at every event and free on every occasion?

Granted you are free, just tell me: Does the sound come to the ear or does the ear go to the sound?

If both sound and silence die away, at such a juncture how could you talk of Zen?

While listening with you ear, you cannot tell. When hearing with your eye, you are truly intimate.

Mumon's Verse

With realization, things make one family;

Without realization, things are separated in a thousand ways.

Without realization, things make one family;

With realization, things are separated in a thousand ways.

16.A Mistake in Speaking

Case 39 of the WMG/MMK

A monk said to Unmon, "The brilliance of the Buddha silently illuminates the whole universe. . ."

But before the could finish the verse, Unmon said, "Aren't those the words of Chōetsu the Genius?"

"Yes, they are," answered the monk.

"You have slipped up in your speaking," Unmon said.

Afterward, Shishin Zenji brought up the matter and said, "Tell me, at what point did the monk err in his speaking?"

Mumon's Comment

If you clearly understand this and realize how exacting Unmon was in his method, and what made the monk err in his speaking, you are qualified to be a teacher of heaven and earth.

If you are not yet clear about it, you are far from saving yourself.

Mumon's Verse

A line cast in the rapids,
The greedy will be caught.
Before you start to open your mouth,
Your life is already lost!

17. Shuzan's Shippei

Case 43 of the WMG/MMK

Shuzan Oshō held up his *shippei* [staff of office] before his disciples and said, "You monks! If you call this a shippei, you oppose its reality.

If you do not call it a shippei, you ignore the fact.

Tell me, you monks, what will you call it?"

Mumon's Comment

If you call it a shippei, you oppose its reality.

If you do not call it a shippei, you ignore the fact.

Words are not available; silence is not available.

Now, tell me quickly, what is it?

Mumon's Verse

Holding up the shippei,

He takes life, he gives life.

Opposing and ignoring interweave.

Even Buddhas and patriarchs beg for their lives.

18. Tosotsu's Three Barriers

Case 47 of the WMG/MMK

Tosotsu Etsu Oshō set up three barriers for his disciples:

1. You leave no stone unturned to explore profundity, simply to see into your true nature.

Now, I want to ask you, just at this moment, where is your true nature?

2. If you realize your true nature, you are free from life and death.

Tell me, when your eyesight deserts you at the last moment, how can you be free from life and death?

3. When you set yourself free from life and death, you should know your ultimate destination. So when the four elements separate, where will you go?

Mumon's Comment

If you can put turning words to these three questions, you are the master wherever you may stand and command Zen whatever circumstances you may be in.

If otherwise, listen: gulping down your meal will fill you easily, but chewing it well can sustain you.

Mumon's Verse

This moment's thoughts sees through eternal time;

Eternal time is just this moment.

If you see through this moment's thought,

You see through the man who sees through this moment.

19. Hōen's "Who Is He?"

Case 45 of the WMG/MMK

Hōen of Tōzan said, "Even Shakya and Maitreya are servants.
I want to ask you, who is he?"

Mumon's Comment

If you can really see this "another" with perfect clarity, it is like encountering your own father at a crossroads. Why should you ask whether you recognize him or not?

Mumon'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.

20. Proceed On from the Top of the Pole

Case 36 of the WMG/MMK

Sekisō Oshō asked, "How can you proceed on further from the top of a hundred-foot pole?"

Another eminent teacher of old said, "You, who sit on the top of a hundred-foot pole, although you have entered the Way you are not yet genuine.

Proceed on from the top of the pole, and you will show your whole body in the ten directions."

Mumon's Comment

If you go on further and turn your body about, no place is left where you are not the master.

But even so, tell me, how will you go on further from the top of a hundred-foot pole? Eh?"

Mumon's Verse

He darkens the third eye of insight
And clings to the first mark on the scale.
Even though he may sacrifice his life,
He is only a blind man leading the blind.