

Ummon on Time

SUZUKI DAISSETZ

UMMON¹ once gave this sermon: "As to what precedes the fifteenth, I have nothing to ask you about; but when the fifteenth is over, let me have from you one statement [expressing the ultimate truth of Buddhism]."

No monk came forward to venture an answer.

Thereupon the master gave this: "Every day a fine day."²

"One statement" (*ikku*, or *i-chü* in Chinese) is almost a technical term in Zen. It means any form of utterance: a word, a phrase, or sentence, or even an apparently meaningless exclamation; it also means any kind of physical movement such as raising eyebrows, putting forth a staff or *bowu*, coming down from the chair, leaving the room, or even kicking down the questioner. In fact, "one statement" is anything that the human mind may resort to to give expression to what it perceives to be final fact. When this one statement is demanded by the Zen master, he is asking your comprehension of the truth of Zen. In the present case Ummon gives out an enigmatical formula which you are expected to answer by "one statement." What he aims at here is to make you get rid of the ordinary notion of time whereby we generally

* This unpublished article, which dates from about 1949, was written by Dr. Suzuki as a response to a question from Kusunoki Kyō, formerly one of his students at Otani University. We wish to thank Mr. Kusunoki for his cooperation in making it available to us. We also wish to thank the Matsugaoka Library of Kamakura for permission to use it here. Slight editorial revisions and footnotes have been added by the editors. —Eds.

¹ Yün-men 雲門, 862–949. Founder of the Yün-men (Ummon) sect of Zen in the T'ang dynasty.

² Dr. Suzuki's manuscript gives two alternative translations for this sentence: (1) This is another fine day; (2) One fine day succeeds another.

endeavour to achieve immortality. For as long as we cherish the notion of time as we do in our commonsense intercourse with the world, we are never able to live in the true sense of the term, nor are we able to come in contact with Reality. To gain an immortal life means to rise above or to go beyond time.

Ummon thus here proposes to crush the idea we have about days, months, years, centuries, ages, etc. For our practical convenience we divide what is designated time into so many parts such as days, hours, minutes, seconds, etc., and make ourselves believe that these divisions are realities and that sixty minutes make an hour, twenty-four hours make a day, and so many days a month, a year; and when the operation goes on endlessly, we have finally an eternity. In other words we believe that a month containing thirty days can be divided into two parts each of which consists of fifteen days and that we can speak of the first half or the second half of the month, that is, of the three periods of time: the past, the present and the future, as if they were all objectively or rather absolutely real. But the fact is that time is like paper money whose actual value depends upon what it represents or registers, or that it is like the reflection of a man in water, which has no reality. If we thus wish to grasp the thing itself and not its shadow, we must abandon the notion of the actuality of "fifteen days" making up a part of a real month.

When Ummon announces that he is not concerned with the dates prior to the fifteenth of the month, he means thereby that he has nothing to do with things or events or experiences so called which are supposed to have taken place in those days, that is, in the past, and therefore that the past as such has no reality to him. As the past as such has no reality, the future as such cannot have any reality either. All events and experiences which may fill up the future blankness of time are non-existent. When time is thus wiped out, is what is left mere nothingness, perfect void? Evidently it is not, for Ummon wants to have us make "one statement" about it where there is neither the past nor the future, and therefore no present. If it were absolute nothingness Ummon could not ask us to give out "one statement." In his demand for it, it is seen that there is something here about which one can make an assertion of one kind or another. Surely enough, the master himself has given out a pointer whereby the Absolute can be "traced." "Every day a fine day" is Ummon's "one statement," and altogether a most expressive

one. Engo³ comments here: "The bright moonlight and the refreshing breeze—they are accessible indeed to every household."

This kōan of Ummon regarding the fifteenth day of the month is intended to break up our notion of time and consequently that of birth-and-death and of immortality. As long as we hold on to the idea that there is what is called time—something blank and altogether indeterminate, in which events or experiences are registered in the order of past, present, and future, we can never find a final abode of rest, not to say anything about logical dilemmas and metaphysical complexities which lead us to endless quibbling.

Ummon's way of putting the question is altogether novel and unique. He attacks our common-sense understanding or rather misunderstanding of the nature of time—and this in quite an unexpected manner. We talk as a matter of course, that is, as a fact beyond any questioning and absolutely predetermined or pre-established, about the progress of time. When a month is cut into two halves, each contains fifteen days, and when the first fifteen days are abolished, the second fifteen days are also abolished—as a month is made up of two fifteen days and each is complementary to the other. Ummon's demand to establish the reality of the coming fifteen days which have nothing to do with the preceding ones is practically unanswerable. It is utterly nonsensical from the commonsense point of view. No wonder the monks remained silent. The demand, however trivial and nonsensical it may appear in its wording, directly and in the most fundamental sense cuts into the very centre of our notion of the world, that is, it touches upon the question of ultimate reality.

This is where lies the altogether unparalleled characteristic Zen discipline. The most fundamental problems of religion and philosophy are casually as it were picked up and pondered in connection with our daily experiences, which are commonly regarded as not affecting our spiritual life. Instead of making reference to such abstract ideas of time, space, causality, God, human destiny, logical consistency, ethical values, etc., Zen talks about the days of the month

³ Yüan-wu 圓悟, 1063–1135. A Zen priest of the Sung dynasty. His "comments" on this kōan concerning Ummon occur in Case 6 of the *Hekigan roku* (*Pi-yen lu*). Related particulars about the comments and the authorship of the *Hekigan roku* may be found in Dr. Suzuki's "On the *Hekigan roku*," *F.B.*, Vol. 1, No. 1. pp. 5–9.

and comes to the conclusion that "every day is a fine day" or that "one 'good morning' follows another," or that "the bright moonlight and the refreshing breeze belong to every household." What the philosopher has to write out a huge volume about, what the religious leader has to give out a long series of sermons and discourses on, is disposed of by the Zen master in one terse sentence. Sometimes even this is dispensed with, for the master is quite frequently found too lazy and may repulse the tremendous assault of his pupils by a sheer yawn or by a "hossu."

In this respect Ummon was particularly noted for his laconic answers. When a disciple asked, "When a man murders the parents, he confesses the sin before the Buddha; but when he murders the Buddha or a patriarch, where would he go for his confession?" Replied Ummon: "*Lou!*" ("In full view!")

A monk asked, "What is the treasure-eye of the Holy Dharma?" Ummon said, "*P'u!*" ("Everywhere!")

One of his best disciples, whose name was Ch'eng-yüan,⁴ stayed with Ummon for a period of eighteen years, and the only instruction he received from the master was "O Yüan!" to which he responded, "Yes, Master." This calling and answering is said to have taken place every day, and at the end of the eighteen years Yüan's mind opened to the meaning of this enigmatic daily performance. Ummon then announced, "After this I won't call out to you any more."

"Where is it where no thinking is possible?" another monk asked, and Ummon's reply was, "It is beyond your calculation." This is in fact no answer, for what is beyond the ken of thinking is indeed also beyond calculation. It is the same as another Zen master's answering "Zen" to "What is Zen?" But with all our logical acumen or philosophical penetration can we go beyond calling a spade a spade? What is known as explanation or interpretation or understanding is no more than giving so many different names to one and the same thing. After so many wanderings, one finds himself standing on the same spot where he made his first start. Zen is Zen, Buddha is Buddha, or what is unknowable is unknowable. But the trouble with us all is that we think we know what time is when we speak about days, months, and years. Ummon thus takes us to task by asking us to make "one statement" concerning a

⁴ Chō-en 澄遠, n.d.

month which has no first fifteen days but only a second fifteen. We are thus suddenly ushered into the midst of timeless time where we are expected to perform a mental somersault. What has at first sight appeared to be a sort of conundrum turns out now to be one of the most basic problems of life. Zen as a rule follows this course, that is, when it requests of us to make a mustard seed hold Mount Sumeru, or when it compares the appearance of all the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas in the world to a flash of lightning. Bankei,⁵ a Zen master of the early Tokugawa era, was once asked by one of his disciples who treated him to watermelon: "This melon is as big as the entire universe itself, and where can you insert your teeth?" Answered Bankei, "Be good enough to accept these melon seeds."

Zen makes no reference to God, or his love, or our sins, nor does it discourse on an immortal life, heavenly bliss, repentance, prayer, or many other subjects with which religious books are generally overflowing. Ummon was once asked, "How old are you, Master?" The disciple by proposing this question completely ignores what is commonly regarded as vital in one's religious life, the question of a life after this one. A most conventional question is given instead, especially in the East where people show respect to elderly persons by asking their age. The master's answer was quite a startling one, "Seven times nine are sixty-eight." "A strange arithmetic. Why so?" "For your sake then I will subtract five years." Is Ummon making a fool of his disciple? Here is, however, Ummon's deadly thrust into the very notion of numbers or of time. Those of us who are inalienably gone over to the logic of $1 + 1 = 2$, are to lie dead helplessly before it. But if we open our eyes to the logic of Ummon's illogicalness, we would surely find ourselves in the company of immortals.

Daiten the Zen master,⁶ of the T'ang, was greeted by Kan Taishi,⁷ one of the greatest literati of the dynasty, who asked, "What is your age, Master?" The master held up the rosary which he carried in his hands, and said, "Do you understand?" The great scholar confessed his inability to read the Zen master's mind, whereupon the latter said, "One hundred and eight, day and night." This requires an explanation for our readers who may not know

⁵ 盤珪, 1622-1693.

⁶ Ta-tien 大顯, 732-824.

⁷ Han Yü 韓愈, 768-824.

anything about the Buddhist rosary. It contains 108 beads, representing the evil passions, which are, according to the Buddhist teaching, 108. As you count the beads before the Buddha, you reflect on your evil passions, vowing to conquer them one after another. A pious soul would no doubt practise this day and night, but with the Zen master here the piety itself has nothing to do [with it], he is essentially concerned with the counting. The counting of the one hundred and eight beads day and night, year in year out—do we ever come to the end of counting? In fact it does not matter whether the rosary is a string of one hundred and eight beads or just one solitary bead, as long as we go on counting them. And is not the asking about one's age counting? Where do we really start our counting? Indeed we do count, but this counting is setting up an arbitrary beginning in a string of an infinite number of beads—infinite in either way, backward or forward. The Zen master naturally does not reason like this, he simply lifts the rosary, and this is enough for one with the Zen eye.

To cite another instance in regard to number, Jōshū⁸ was once asked by a monk, "What are numbers?" He replied, "One, two, three, four, five." The monk asked, "What is not concerned with numbers?" The answer was, "One, two, three, four, five." Jōshū's treatment of numbers appears different from that of Ummon as far as a superficial consideration is concerned, but from the Zen point of view Ummon and Jōshū are harping on the same string. Their angle of observation is, if it is necessary to specify it, from the philosophy of the Avatamsaka, which is the highest peak of Buddhist thought philosophically elaborated. In this case, Jōshū is more straightforward and somewhat conceptual, while Ummon in his statement, "Every day is a fine one," is thoroughly matter-of-fact, refusing to separate himself from his everyday world of sense-experience. In Jōshū we can probably find something thought-provoking, but in Ummon there is nothing suggestive of intellectuality.

The impenetrability of Ummon may better be understood when his statement is compared with Eckhart's beggar.

Said Meister Eckhart to a beggar, "Good morrow, brother," "The same to you, Sir, but I never have bad ones."—"How so, brother?"

⁸ Chao-chou 趙州, 778-897.

he asked.—“All God gives me to bear I cheerfully suffer for his sake deeming myself unworthy, so never am I sad or sorry.”—“Where didst thou find God first?” he asked.—“Leaving all creatures I found God.”—“Where didst thou leave God, brother?” he said.—“In every man’s pure heart.”—“What manner of man art thou, brother?” quoth he.—“I am a king,” he said.—“Of what?” he queried.—“Of my own flesh. Whatsoever my spirit desires of God my flesh is more eager, more ready to do and to bear than my mind to accept.”—“Kings have kingdoms,” he said; “where is thy realm, brother?”—“In my own soul.”—“How so, brother?” he asked.—“When, having locked the doors of my five senses, I am desiring God with all my heart then do I find God in my soul as clearly and as joyful as he is in life eternal.”—He said, “Granting thee holy, who made thee so brother?”—“Sitting still and thinking deep and keeping company with God has gotten me to heaven, for never could I rest in aught inferior to God. Now having found him I have peace and do rejoice eternally in him and that is more than any temporal kingship. No outward act however perfect but hinders the interior life.”⁹

To say that “every morning is a good morning” is intelligible enough to anyone who is bathed in the loving sunlight of God, but to make this remark in connection with the days of a month is to say the least mystifying, and one may suspect something of malicious playfulness on the part of the Zen master. What connection, one may ask, is there between timeless time and the fineness, meteorological or metaphysical, of the day? To penetrate this mystery and to come in touch with this connection is in truth the object of Zen discipline. The mystification, if it is to be so called, we encounter everywhere in Zen literature is not just meant to put us in an intellectual quandary, or just to test our practical wits; it is meant to arouse us from the complacent acceptance of a world-view based on Ignorance (*avidyā*) and Egoism (*ātman-darśana*), which is the source of discord and suffering of all kinds, not only physical but moral and spiritual as well. Ummon rings the bell of warning by his statement, “Every day a fine day,” to make us come to the realization of a new vista which is at once intellectual and super-intellectual. And here is

⁹ Franz Pfeiffer, *Meister Eckhart*, trans. C. de B. Evans (London: John M. Watkins, 1924), p. 438.

where Zen occupies such a unique and an almost absolutely unparalleled position not only in the world-history of religion but even in the systems of Buddhist teaching and discipline.

The Chinese way of commenting on such statements as Ummon's is exemplified by the remarks on it of Engo, who is one of the greatest Zen masters of the Sung. "This statement by Ummon pierces through the past and the present, all that has gone before and all that will follow is simultaneously at one stroke cut down. Even when I say this, I am guilty of paraphrasing Ummon after his words. Suicide is better than murdering others. You just attempt to reason about it and you fall into an abyss."

We are now prepared I think to read the poetical comment by Setchō on Ummon's "Every day a fine day." The comment is no doubt just as unintelligible as the original dictum, for when the one is understood the other will be readily understood. They are all complementary.

Put one aside,
 Hold on to seven.
 Heaven above and earth below and the four quarters,
 Nowhere his equal is to be found.
 He walks quietly on the murmuring waters of the stream;
 He surveys the sky and traces the shadow of the flying bird.
 The weeds grow rampant,
 The clouds are densely overhanging.
 Around the cave the flowers are showered where Subhūti is lost in
 meditation;
 The advocate of the Void deserves pity as much as contempt.
 No wavering here!
 If you do, thirty blows!

Setchō was a great literary talent, and we can state that together with Engo he has opened up a new era in the history of Zen. The *Hekigan roku*, which is a composite work of Setchō and Engo, is the great textbook for Zen students, especially in Japan. Whether they understand it or not, they talk glibly about it.

Setchō's genius generally consists in poetically dressing up the meaning of the original statement whereby the latter is more graphically and visually

presented. This is especially [true] in this case; where Ummon has wiped out the first fifteen days of the month trying to save the second fifteen, Setchō gives up one and takes in seven. The “one” here has no essential relation to the unification of multitudes under one heading, that is, One Reality, which Setchō wipes out as not cogent to the truthful understanding of existence; the “seven” too has no reference to any numerical grouping of concepts. It is simply one, it is simply seven, and they can be anything, any group of things or ideas, they have nothing to do [with] the numerical notations. What Setchō proposes here for us to achieve is to take hold of anything particularized as “one” or “seven” or “fifteen,” or a tree, or a mountain, or a wide expanse of water, or a galaxy of heavenly bodies, where there is no particularization possible in the midst of so-called “vast emptiness.” That is to say, Setchō’s idea is to create all things where everything has been thoroughly expurgated, to identify opposites, to synthesize contradictions, to reconstruct a universe by annihilating it. Setchō and Ummon are of one mind in this illogical undertaking. When “one” is given up, where can “seven” find its abode? How is a month possible when its first half is obliterated? Yet the one wants to hold on to seven while the other demands a statement in the second half of a month which is in fact no month without its first complement. To work out this impossibility is the object of Zen kōan meditation.

Engo’s characteristically Zen remark on this reads:

“It is most urgently to be avoided to make your living on words and phrases. Why? There is no juice in the old dumpling. Most people fall into the habit of superficial ratiocination, but the point is to grasp the sense even prior to its being expressed in words or phrases, for it is then that absolute operation presents itself before you and you see it in perfect naturalness.

“It was thus that Śākya the Old Sage, after attaining Bodhi in Magadha, contemplated on this subject for thrice seven days: ‘The state of absolute tranquillity of all things is indeed beyond words and expressions; I would rather refrain from discoursing on it, but speedily enter into Nirvana.’ When you come to this, there is no way of opening your mouth, and it was only by means of *upāya* [‘power of skillful means in Buddha’s possession’] that he began preaching, first for the sake of the five monks, and then, at 360 meetings, all the sermons and discourses which have been bequeathed to us. All this is a matter of *upāya*. That the Buddha took off his royal garment and put on the

beggar's was altogether due to the inevitability of the case, for he wished to come down to the level of secondary intelligence so as to make his insight more palatable and attractive to us all. If he were to assert it in its absolute significance, there would be no one-soul, even no half-soul, who could grasp him altogether unconditionally.

"Let me ask then, 'What is the first word?'¹⁰ As regards this, Setchō gives us a kind of intimation to make us have a glimpse [into the truth]. Only when you do not see any Buddhas above, nor any sentient beings below, when you do not see, outwardly, any mountains and rivers and great earth, nor, inwardly, have any hearing, seeing, recollecting, and cognition, when you are like one who awakens to life after going through the last stage of death, will you realize that long and short, good and bad, right and wrong, all are beaten up into one piece, which when held up for your inspection betrays no other way of recognition than as one. It is thus that you may move about in any manner without deviating from the right path. You will also comprehend Setchō's comment: 'Give up one, hold on to seven: Above and below and on all sides [you find] no peers anywhere!'

"Indeed, when you comprehend these lines, you find no peers anywhere—above and below and on all sides. A world of multiplicities—grasses, herbs, people, animals, etc.—reflects your image each thing in its own way. Therefore it is said that

In the midst of the ten thousand forms the Body all by itself is
manifested;

A close, personal recognition alone keeps you to be its intimate friend.
In bygone days I sought it erroneously by the roadside,
But today as I see it ice lies in the burning coals.

"This is indeed, 'Above the heavens and below, I alone am the honoured One!' People mostly search it among trivialities and altogether neglect looking it up in the source. When the source is properly located, it is like the wind

¹⁰ By "first word," which is a technical term with Zen masters, is meant the ultimate or fundamental experience from which all human intelligence starts. It is the Buddha's primary insight of Bodhi, it is the content of *satori*, whereby all our conflicting ideas are reconciled. [Dr. Suzuki's footnote.]

going over the weeds which by themselves lie low, or like water making its own passageway along the ditch."

When this much is understood, what follows is easy to grasp. In fact, the whole intent of Ummon's statement "Every day a fine day" is given a sufficient interpretation in these first three lines of Setchō's poetical comment. The rest is more or less amplification by way of concrete visualization.

To cut the running stream in twain softly walking into it, or to trace the track of a bird flying in the air is a physical impossibility as far as logic based on a dualistically opposed conception of the world is concerned, but this is where Zen delights in contradicting our "common-sense" experiences. For it is by doing this that we can come around to a rightful comprehension of things as they are. Zen literature abounds with this sort of paradox or logical impossibility; it may be better to say that Zen is those paradoxes or that Zen is where they are no more perceived to be so. Handle your spade in your empty hands; ride a horse by walking on foot; see ice in the midst of a blazing fire; hear the bell even before it is rung; behold the north star by turning towards the south; etc., etc.

But if we stay with these logical or physical irrationalities and are unable to go any further, we are doomed, we are victims of onesidedness, our world-view will be hopelessly tainted in black, where no sun will ever rise to shine on the beautiful varieties of a living world. The paradoxes are to be transcended. Hence Setchō's two following lines:

How luxuriantly growing the grasses!
How densely rising the mists!

If we wish, however, to live in the darkness or emptiness of all things, in which we annihilate contradictions of every description by dumping good and bad, right and wrong, straight and crooked, cold and hot, water and fire, all into one ditch of absolute identity, we can no more have any kind of movement, we have just to stand still, for life ceases in this darkness to pulsate and function. We must come out of it in order to be alive and creating. The wintry blackness of identity philosophy is too dreary, too prohibitive, and life is impossible here. To see clouds rising from the mountain-peaks, to make the grasses spring forth from under the chilly snowfield, to hear the birds

singing in chorus the blessings of a warm sunshine, we must immerse ourselves in a world of multitudinous pluralities and of endlessly contradicting varieties.

Setchō now naturally proceeds to make reference to the teaching of *śūnyatā* (void or emptiness) in the *Prajñāpāramitā sūtras*. This doctrine is very much misunderstood even among Buddhist scholars, for they take it for sheer emptiness from the relativistic point of view. Emptiness in their [word missing] means the absence of a reality, a purely negative condition which is still a something, and not absolute nothingness or emptiness as advocated in the philosophy of *Prajñāpāramitā*. Such a relative conception of *śūnyatā* has nothing creative or operative in it, it is altogether static and cannot be the source of dynamic activities, moral, spiritual, and physical. Buddhism and Zen have nothing to do with it. No birds fly in it, no grasses grow from it, no clouds, no vapours rise out of it, no waves surge over its surface.

Subhūti symbolizes the relativistic conception of *śūnyatā*; silence, dead, absolutely quiet, and altogether devoid of operative qualities. He sits in a perfect state of tranquillity forgetful of his environment, outer and inner; of things not only of their world, but of all the other worlds, of gods and men, of good and bad. Heavenly flowers are being scattered about him—this is the gods' way of praising Subhūti's absorption in *śūnyatā*. Subhūti notices it and wants to know who is doing it. The gods announce themselves to be from the Brahma Heavens. Subhūti wants to know what their motive is for performing this miracle. The gods answer: "We all praise how well you preach *śūnyatā*." Subhūti says, "I have not uttered a word about it." The gods protest, "O Venerable Subhūti, you have not uttered a word nor have we heard a sound; and this saying not a word and hearing not a sound is indeed true *prajñā*." So saying the gods shook the earth and showered flowers profusely.

Subhūti is in the right, and so are the gods, but as I have repeatedly remarked what is most essential and vital in the understanding of Zen and indeed of all Mahāyāna teachings is not to pay court too much to *śūnyatā* but to pass on to the final stage of Zen discipline. This is the warning given by Setchō in the next line: "Let one snap his disapproving fingers at the god *śūnyatā*." When the latter is not taken in its proper bearings it is sure to lead us astray. Therefore, continues Setchō, "Be not stirred!" If you are stirred, you deviate from the straight course of Emptiness and "thirty blows" will be

UMMON ON TIME

the punishment you get for it. A Zen insight is a direct looking into the working of the Absolute, it abhors any kind of mediation, which is “being stirred.” Setchō is thus grandmotherly enough to caution us about getting into such trouble.

To conclude, I quote again a poem by Setchō on Subhūti’s meditation, in which the Zen conception of Emptiness (śūnyatā) is well expressed:

Showers are passed, clouds hang frozen, the morning begins to dawn:
Several peaks as if painted reveal themselves boldly silhouetted in
blue.
Subhūti sits meditating in his rock-cave, failing to grasp the meaning
[of śūnyatā],
And the heavenly flowers are caused to come down, shaking the
earth.

Ummon’s view of “timeless time” and Setchō’s view of Emptiness or Void (śūnyatā) after all point in the same direction, and when this direction is recognized we are all able to enjoy “a fine day,” which comes on us every day.