



Selections from
The Mind of Clover
by Robert Aitken

The Mind of Clover

The Hermit of Lotus Peak held forth his staff before his assembly and asked, "When the Ancient Ones reached *this*, why didn't they stay there?" The assembly was silent.

Answering for his listeners, he said, "Because it has no power for guidance."¹

The original says, "Because it has no power for the path of others." This case, number twenty-five in the *Blue Cliff Record*, is one of many in our koan study that illustrate the importance of emerging from beneath the Bodhi tree and responding to others.

When: the Hermit held forth his staff, what was that? Just that! Like Fu Ta-shih striking the lectern to expound the *Diamond Sutra*,² the Hermit of Lotus Peak was showing the Dharma, the pure and clear law-body that comes forth as all things.

His question was, "When the Ancient Ones attained realization of pure and clear Dharma, why didn't they just stay in that beautiful place of complete, all-penetrating peace until they passed on to *parinirvāna*?" When the Buddha was confirmed by the morning star, why did he then seek out his five disciples? When Mahākāśyapa was confirmed by the Buddha's teaching at Mr. Grdhrakūta, why did he feel compelled to become a teacher himself? And when Dōgen Zenji found his body and mind fallen away, why did he bother to return to Japan?

Realizing "just this!" liberated these worthies, freeing them from self-concern and revealing their unity with all beings, but one can't stop there. The fulfillment of your experience of suffering, your compassion, is a matter of engaging with all beings in their travail.

So the Hermit continues his teisho, still holding out his staff, and asks, "After all, what is it?" Nobody answers, and he says, "Holding my staff across the back of my neck, going to the thousand, the ten thousand peaks."³ The myriad peaks are not mountains of isolation, but the peaks and valleys of our lives. The Hermit sauntered among these peaks quite at ease with himself, and we can be sure that he guided everyone he met as freely and generously as he guided his assembly in this case.

Our task, too, is to respond generously to others. We can take as our models not only Shakyamuni, the Hermit, and our other great Dharma ancestors, but also such humble beings as bushes and grasses. With every fiber, beings of the plant world are guiding others, perpetuating their species, beginning new species as circumstances permit, conveying their vitality to soil,

¹ See Cleary, *The Blue Cliff Record*, I, p. 164.

² Ibid., II, p. 424.

³ Ibid., I, p. 164.

waters, air, insects, animals, and people. This is Mother Nature, we say in Western culture. This is the *Sambhogakāya*, we say in Buddhism, the body of Indra's Net, the harmony of universal symbiosis. The *Sambhogakāya* is also our own way of realizing and actualizing that unity.

How do we actualize the oneness of all beings? Through responsibility, the ability to respond—like that of the clover. When the clover is cut, its roots die and release their nitrogen, and the soil is enriched. Earthworms flourish in the rich soil and deposit more nutrients. New seeds fall, take root, mature, and feed other organisms.

Clover does not think about responsibility, and neither did Shakyamuni. He simply arose from his seat and went looking for his friends. The clover simply puts down its roots, and puts up its leaves and flowers.

Fundamentally, the no-thought of the clover and the no-thought of Shakyamuni are the same. They come forth, and their response to circumstances is to give nourishment. No-thought comes forth here as clover, there as Shakyamuni. Single, universal nature appears like this in the world. We identify clover here and Shakyamuni there, and acknowledge that the two are very different indeed. The clover produces pollen for the bees without a thought; Shakyamuni twirls a flower before his assembly without a thought. But clover cannot call a meeting. Shakyamuni cannot metabolize nutrients directly from the soil.

Clover is incapable of not nurturing. It can't do anything but nurture. Shakyamuni is capable of not nurturing. With a poisonous thought, he is a poisonous person. With an enlightened thought, he is an enlightened person. With his great realization, he is unlikely to slip back into poisonous ways, but he could, for he is human.

"All beings are the Tathagata," Shakyamuni said, "but their delusions and attachments keep them from testifying to that fact." What are delusions and attachments? Poisonous thoughts of greed, hatred, and ignorance. The poison of not nurturing. What are enlightened thoughts? Compassionate ones, suffering with others in response to the "sounds of the world. "

Shakyamuni went through a metamorphosis from self-centered thinking to enlightenment. This metamorphosis fulfills the possibilities of essential nature in the human being, just as the metamorphosis from caterpillar to butterfly fulfills its possibilities in the *Lepidoptera*.

What is human metamorphosis? I want to be careful to specify what I mean. With realization, you do not become something else, the way a caterpillar melts inside its cocoon and becomes a butterfly. That kind of analogy creates all kinds of trouble for the Zen student. He or she thinks, "Ah, if only I could have *kensho*, then all my problems would be solved. "

It isn't so. The human being does not metamorphose into something else. *Kensho* is a peep into essential nature, a glimpse of a shallow experience, a good look if a deeper one. But the practice continues, and in fact it begins there anew.

Nonetheless, the word "metamorphosis" does have some value in describing the Zen process. Truly beginning the practice anew, we learn that somehow we have been victims of our own thinking. We find the original ground that underlies thinking, the source of response. In taking this step, the human being does not become an angel, but rather finds affinity with the silent clover. Our metamorphoses, yours and mine, do not change our form, but rather enable us to acknowledge the ancient truth of no-mind.

All beings, stones, clouds, trees, and animals (including human animals) come forth as no-mind. However, they differ radically in their responsiveness. The clover nurtures itself and its environment without making distinctions. The pig is hostile at some times, friendly at other times. The porpoise rescues the drowning sailor. Where is the human being in this scheme?

Unfulfilled in metamorphosis, the human being is alien, exploiting others by sex, race, class, nation, and species. Fulfilled, we realize and actualize the Net of Indra—with each being nourished by and nourishing all other beings. The root difference between the exploitive and the nurturing paths is made clear in Dōgen Zenji's couplet in the *Genjōkōan*, which I quoted earlier:

That the self advances and confirms the myriad things is called delusion;
That the myriad things advance and confirm the self is enlightenment.⁴

That the nation-state advances and consumes the whole earth with its technology is lethal delusion. That the wilderness of honey-creepers, koa forests, and snowy volcanoes advances and inspires your heart is Buddhahood.

Thus the place of the human being is a matter of choice. We can destroy the gene pool of the earth organism and eliminate all choices, or we can discipline ourselves and find the source of responsibility. That source is the mind of clover. There you are nurtured; there you nurture. Settle there, at least once in your life.

The way is clear in the clover-mind. Self and other are one mind (call it no-mind if you like), the mind of "mountains, rivers, and the great earth, the sun, the moon, and the stars."⁵ This is the mind that advances as the song of the cardinal or the scent of incense and confirms the essential self, you and me. This is the mature human experience.

We find here our commonality with the pig at its friendliest and with the porpoise that pushes the exhausted swimmer ashore. We find our commonality with the Buddha preaching to his friends at Varanasi, and with Gyōgi Bosatsu as he dug waterways for peasants in old Japan.

What, you may ask, about "Nature, red in tooth and claw"? Isn't that also the Tao? What about Blake's "Tiger, tiger, burning bright"? Aren't ferocity and blood-thirst the mind, just like mountains and rivers?

Of course. Universal symbiosis involves the constant absorption of beings by other beings. The bloodstream in your body is such a system in miniature. You may feel that somehow a big tiger is more violent than a little white corpuscle, but essentially both are living out their lives in harmony with the great, dynamic intraplay of the cosmos.

Moreover, we can learn from the tiger. First, for all her violence, the tiger does not threaten the ecosystem as we human beings do. Second, during long periods in her life, the tiger is at rest. She nuzzles her mate, nurtures her cubs, and naps more than other creatures. Now the tiger is violent, now she is at rest.

What is the quality of that rest? She is ready to act, of course, but in that readiness, she is completely relaxed. Reflect upon human rest, as you watch her, lying there so comfortably.

The human being who has not evolved beyond selfishness has no rest. Rather there is something the Buddha called delusion and attachment that permits a continuation of strong feelings. At its extreme, appetite becomes insatiable greed, anger becomes unrelenting hatred, and a weak personal image induces defensive scheming. Most of us are more moderate, but to some degree we all know this constant stream of emotionally charged thinking, and we have no peace, not even in our sleep.

Why should people be afflicted in such a way? This is a key question, one that the Buddha asked. I think that suffering is process. Just as the caterpillar suffers its change, so must we. The same drive that brings the caterpillar out to feed on hibiscus leaves turns it to spinning its cocoon. The same drive that fuels the Three Poisons in the human being matures in realization of mind.

This is the human drive toward peace and unity, but unless it is correctly understood it becomes destructive. If you foolishly seek peace through alcohol, you end up sedating yourself, harming your body, and destroying what peace there may be in your family. If you seek unity in the universe through a multinational corporation, the unity you achieve is your greed with that of

⁴ See Maezumi, *The Way of Everyday Life*, n.p.

⁵ Dōgen Kigen: "Now I see clearly that the mind is the mountains, rivers, and the great earth; the sun, the moon, and the stars." See Kim, *Dōgen Kigen: Mystical Realist*, p. 148.

many others. The search for peace and unity is correctly the search for realization of the empty, infinite self and the empty, infinite universe—free of concepts, with all things appearing as their own reason.⁶

The long campaign for this realization draws on human racial memory, which in the present stage of evolution is minutely articulate compared to that of other animals. The genes that give humans potential for skills and communication are different from the DNA strands that permit the beaver to build his dam and announce danger with his tail. The beaver must go on making dams in the same way he has done for centuries, but human beings can make dams with more and more refinement in technology.

This sets up problems. We can destroy the earth with our dams. We can annihilate four and a half billion years of earth history with our bombs, and also extinguish the future of the earth, which extends ahead potentially for another almost endlessly long period of time. No other being can do that.

Thus we have a special responsibility to complete the human metamorphosis—to bring the mind of clover to conscious awareness. In touch with that mind, we come forth as mature human beings, realizing that all things are this very self.

Such realization is not wishy-washy. I realize that others are not separate from myself, but if someone very powerful and very reactionary confronts me, I also know very well that he regards me as his antagonist. It is my responsibility to acknowledge his strength within the set we establish and to use it to convey the Dharma, just as a judo expert uses the thrust of his opposite. This is similar to the *mondo*, the dialogue of Zen teacher and student, and involves a kind of divine cunning in the interaction. The participants are separate individuals, but at the same time they are members of the same nose-hole society, as Nakagawa Sōen Roshi has said.

When the Three Poisons are paramount in our minds, this sense of fundamental kinship is only an abstraction. Recently two men circled the earth for a week at the rate of one circumnavigation every ninety minutes. They encompassed the whole world many times, but they were very high in the air, playing the Marine Hymn and the Air Force Hymn on their hi-fi. In their act of encompassing the world they remained locked in their group, class, and nation—denying the Net of Indra.

Such limited understanding finds its extreme form in the paranoid who says, "There's a communist in that high-rise spying on me with binoculars." But even people with relatively healthy psyches fall into delusion, and so we scheme about defending ourselves and mastering all beings with our sophisticated intellectual, political, economic, and technological weapons. We advance and confirm the ten thousand things and thus compound delusion and bring the world to an unprecedented crisis.

Like all human institutions, like all humanity and all life and all inanimate things of our world, the Buddha Dharma itself is hostage to our reckless exploitation of the future. There won't be any more Buddha Dharma when our earth is destroyed by nuclear war, or by biological holocaust.

Be clear about this. Distinguish between the Buddha Dharma as Buddhist teachings, and the Dharmakaya as the pure and clear law body. Wu-men wrote, "When the world is destroyed, *it* is not destroyed."⁷ "It" is the Dharmakaya, infinite emptiness that is charged with possibilities. It is neither born nor destroyed. Once when I raised the possibility of nuclear annihilation with Yamada Kōun Roshi, he said, "Well, even if the whole earth is utterly destroyed, something, I don't know what, will emerge from essential nature. "

⁶ One of my readers asked, "How do you reconcile all things appearing as their own reason—that is to say, independently—with the Net of Indra and universal symbiosis?" I am comfortable with this paradox. Like the identity of form and emptiness, the fact appears in nature, and it becomes a paradox only when we formulate it.

⁷ See Yamada, *Gateless Gate*, p. 119.

This is true, and it is truly an inspiring solace, but in the course of the destruction, the Buddha Dharma, the teachings of the Buddha and all his successors, will be lost. Can you hear Dōgen Zenji objecting? I certainly can.

Historically, Zen people nurtured their temples with samu, sutras of work, maintaining buildings and grounds. They supported their religious life with *takuhatsu*, showing the bowl of the Buddha in villages, towns, and cities, while accepting money and food. We have samu and *takuhatsu* with maintenance work, fund raising, and publications at our Western Zen centers, but maintenance in our present era of great danger means nurturing the temple Earth with the same careful planning we give to our assignments on sangha workdays. Showing the bowl of the Buddha must convey the Dharma, but our unprecedented times demand that it present the Ten Grave Precepts in particular. There is no killing and no stealing in the original mind. When we play games of expedience and compromise, feeding our own ego needs at the expense of others, maintaining our national standards of living at the expense of other countries, then we are neglecting the law of the universe. The universe will find its equilibrium before long.

Coming forth with power for guidance does not mean exactly the same thing for us that it did for the Hermit of Lotus Peak. We have the same responsibility, the same ability to respond, as Bodhisattvas, but our *upayas*, our compassionate means, will be much different. Today the Buddha Dharma itself must be sprung from its sectarian position to show people everywhere that peace and right action, which they already know in their own hearts, which they learned at mother's breast, is the universal teaching of no-name that can bring decency into our relationships at last.

It follows that Christian, Jewish, Hindu, Moslem, and other faiths must be sprung from their molds also. Traditional Studies, a field pioneered by A. K. Coomaraswamy, Frithjof Schuon, and others, which sets forth perennial metaphysics using metaphors from all world religions, deserves our careful research.⁸ There is no such thing as Zen, as we are always being told. That is, there is nothing fixed to be called Zen Buddhism. If so, then there is nothing fixed to be called any particular religion, and we can all learn from each other.

Likewise, there is no closed system to be called psychology, and we can use such psychological devices as sharing meetings and counseling as our own *upaya*. Western cultural values, such as human equality and reverence for all life, can also be brought into play.

We must save the world, but we can only save it by saving little pieces of it, each of us using his or her own small, partial ability. The task is clear, and very difficult. First we must set about changing our self-centered attitudes as individuals and search out our self-nature under the guidance of a good teacher. Next (the day after we begin to practice, that is) we must set about applying our understanding in the world. This can be overtly a life of service, such as teaching or social work, and it can be service with no tag on it, parenting and working in a store. Finally (on the second day of practice), we need to put our heads and hearts together in synergistic energy to apply the Dharma as a sangha.

I am tired of hearing people say that the application of the teaching is an individual matter. This is the lazy position of someone who does not really take the Bodhisattva vows seriously. If we want to save all beings we can do it efficiently and effectively together, step by step, networking, Indra Networking.

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⁸ See, for example, Frithjof Schuon, *Gnosis: Divine Wisdom* (Bedfont, Middlesex, England: Perennial Books, 1978).

Gandhi, Dōgen, and Deep Ecology

A friend once inquired if Gandhi's aim in settling in the village and serving the villagers as best he could were purely humanitarian. Gandhi replied "I am here to serve no one else but myself, to find my own self-realization through the service of these village folk."⁹

This remarkable conversation reveals Gandhi's stature as a world teacher. It is a true mondo, with the enlightened one responding to the fixed attitude of the questioner, turning the question around and using it as a vehicle for showing the truth that the question in its original form actually obscured.

The question was asked, not without malice, from the conventional suspicion of generosity: Isn't everything you do for others really a way of aggrandizing yourself? Is there really such a thing as pure generosity? Is it possible to live just for others? Aren't you serving your own psychological needs by living with poor people like this?

Gandhi replied from a point of view that is not conventional. He omits the word "humanitarian" entirely from his reply, and indeed I wonder if it is found anywhere in his writings or speeches. For the questioner, humanitarianism seems unrealistic, and in effect, Gandhi acknowledges this, agreeing in order to make a deeper point.

Like a judo expert, Gandhi uses the energy and thrust of the other. Challenged to deny that he is just serving himself, he does not deny it at all, but takes the challenge a step further, and states clearly that the villagers are serving him.

This is not self-aggrandizement, but the way of self-realization, as Gandhi says. Ego-concerns vanish, and the true nature of the one who observes and takes action becomes clear. It is none other than all beings and all things. Thomas Merton observes that Gandhi's practice was the awakening of India and of the world within himself—or, I would say, as himself. Merton obviously felt this was an existential awakening, but whether it was existential or merely political, the truth remains: the other is no other than myself.

The conventional view that serving others is a means for self-aggrandizement is the view that accepts exploitation of people and the environment, wars between nations, and conflicts within the family. As Yasutani Roshi used to say, the fundamental delusion of humanity is to suppose that I am here and you are out there.

Gandhi's view is traditionally Eastern, and is found with differing emphases in Hinduism, Taoism, and in Theravada and Mahayana Buddhism. For Dōgen Zenji and for Zen Buddhists generally, the way is openness to all beings, all things. Each being confirms my self-nature, but if I seek to control the other, I fall into delusion. The *Genjōkōan* again:

That the self advances and confirms the myriad things is called delusion.

That the myriad things advance and confirm the self is enlightenment.

The self imposing upon the other is not only something called delusion, it is the ruination of our planet and all of its creatures. But enlightenment is not just a matter of learning from another human being. When the self is forgotten, it is recreated again and again, ever more richly, by the myriad things and beings of the universe:

⁹ Jag Parvesh Chander, *Teachings of Mahatma Gandhi* (Lahore: The India Books Works, 1945), p. 375. (Tähtinen, *Non-violence as an Ethical Principle*, p. 83).

The wild deer, wand'ring here & there
Keeps the Human Soul from Care.¹⁰

This is not just a matter of sensing the oneness of the universe. Stars of a tropical sky spread across the ceiling of my mind, and the cool wind unlocks my ear.

Such experiences are not philosophy and are not confined to the traditional East, but in the past two hundred years, East or West, we must look to the periphery of culture, rather than to the mainstream, to find anything similar. The mainstream follows a utilitarian interpretation of God's instructions to Noah:

And the fear of you and the dread of you shall be upon every beast of the earth, and upon every fowl of the air, and upon all that moveth on the earth, and upon all the fishes of the sea; into your hand they are delivered.¹¹

It is only a very few, relatively isolated geniuses in the West, such as Wordsworth and Thoreau, who have taught confirmation of the human self by nature, and the crime of confirming nature by the self. For example, here Wordsworth echoes Dōgen:

Think you, 'mid all this mighty sum
Of things for ever speaking,
That nothing of itself will come,
But we must still be seeking?¹²

Openness to the myriad things follows what George Sessions, in his discussion of deep ecology, calls conversion:

The forester ecologist Aldo Leopold underwent a dramatic conversion from the "stewardship" shallow ecology resource-management mentality of man-over-nature to announce that humans should see themselves realistically as "plain members" of the biotic community. After the conversion, Leopold saw steadily and with "shining clarity" as he broke through the anthropocentric illusions of his time and began "thinking like a mountain."¹³

Man-over-nature is the self advancing and confirming the myriad things, an anthropocentric delusion. It is the same mind-set as Americans over Vietnamese, or men over women, or managers over workers, or whites over blacks.

The Deep Ecology movement has grown out of the despair of ecologists over the conventional resource-management mentality that is rapidly depleting our minerals, razing our forests, and poisoning our rivers and lakes. It is precisely the same as the welfare society mentality that manages human resources for the short-term benefit of the managers themselves.

Readers of the conventional media have more awareness of the dangers of war and nuclear poison than they have of the biological holocaust involved in clearing jungles, strip-mining mountains, disrupting the balance of life in oceans, and draining coastal swamps. One must read the journals and bulletins of ecological societies to gain a perspective of the accelerating global

¹⁰ Blake, "Auguries of Innocence," *Poetry and Prose of William Blake*, p. 118.

¹¹ *Genesis* 9:2.

¹² William Wordsworth, "Expostulation and Reply," *Lyrical Ballads*, ed. W.J.B. Owens (New York, etc.: Oxford University Press, 1967), p. 104.

¹³ Sessions, "Spinoza, Perennial Philosophy, and Deep Ecology," p. 15.

disaster that our luxurious way of life is bringing down upon us all.

But even with knowledge, I wonder if it would be possible to reverse the machine of death and destruction. We in the peace movement have sought to levitate the Pentagon, falling into the same delusion that Dōgen Zenji warns us about. When we stopped the *B-1 Bomber*, we got the Cruise Missile. When we stopped the Omnibus Crime Bill, we got another Omnibus Crime Bill. When we stopped LBJ, we got Richard Nixon.

The point is that, with all our good intentions, we are still seeking to advance and control the myriad things. The alternative is not just to respond passively or to run away. Once one thinks like a mountain, the whole world is converted. All things confirm me. Then I sit on dojo cushions that do not move. There is no controller and no one to control.

I think again of Gandhi, urging each of us to follow our own light. Erik H. Erikson suggests that Gandhi held fast to his values to the exclusion of human needs in his family and even in his nation.¹⁴ Probably so. We need not venerate him blindly. With all his flaws, he was surely a forerunner of a New Reformation that seeks to encourage self-sufficiency and personal responsibility for all beings and all things.

In the Buddhist world we have in the past generation seen the development of Sarvodaya Shramana in Sri Lanka, the Coordinating Group for Religion in Society in Thailand, the School of Youth for Social Service in South Vietnam, and Ittōen in Japan. These movements developed in the modern zeitgeist of social consciousness, and have found guidance in the Buddhist doctrine of non-ego and in the Buddhist precepts, just as Gandhi could find guidance for the Indian independence movement in the ancient Hindu doctrine of self-reliance.

In the Christian world, we have seen the rise of similar movements, notably the Catholic Worker, an anarchist network of communal houses in dozens of American cities, set up by families of laymen and laywomen to feed the poor, clothe them, and shelter them, just as Jesus taught: "Inasmuch as you have done it to one of the least of these my brothers and sisters, you have done it to me."¹⁵

These movements grew from their roots with the understanding that confirmation by the myriad things is not just an esoteric experience confined within monastery walls. Swaraj, or independence, was for Gandhi the self-reliance of individuals who practiced the way of realization by complete openness to the British, the ultimate "other" for colonial India. It is also, as Gandhi indicated to the one who questioned his humanitarianism, the practice of being with the poor, the handicapped, the oppressed, thinking as they do, drawing water and digging the earth as they do. It is the practice of realization through their service-and through the service of all others, including police and politicians.

The practice of "being with them" converts the third person, *they, it, she, he*, into the first person, *I* and *we*. For Dōgen Zenji, the others who are "none other than myself" include mountains, rivers, and the great earth. When one thinks like a mountain, One thinks also like the black bear, and this is a step beyond Gandhi's usual concerns to deep ecology, which requires openness to the black bear, becoming truly intimate with him.

This is compassion, suffering with others. Look again at the *Diamond Sutra*: "Dwell nowhere, and bring forth that mind." "Nowhere" is the zero of purest experience, known inwardly as peace and rest. To "come forth" is to stand firmly and contain the myriad things. For the peace or ecology worker, the message of the *Diamond Sutra* would be: "From that place offundamental peace, come forth as a man or woman of peace, presenting peace in the inmost community of those who would destroy it."

¹⁴ Erik H. Erikson, *Gandhi's Truth: On the Origins of Militant Nonviolence* (New York: Norton, 1969), especially p. 251.

¹⁵ *Matt.* 25:40.

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