



Sogen's One Drop of Water

Sogen no itteki sui

In Okayama there was a master named Gisan Zenrai Zenji who made excellent use of these words. A monk training with him at Sogenji was deeply enlightened upon hearing these same words and even took the name of Tekisui Zenji, or One Drop of Water Zenji. This episode is passed along at Sogenji.

In the year 1837, when his teacher Taigen Shigen Zenji died, Gisan Zenrai Zenji became the abbot of Sogenji and raised disciples there. Many monks gathered at Sogenji to train, often more than one hundred at a time. Among them was one named Giboku Zenji. One day Giboku Zenji's job was to prepare the bath for Master Gisan; he was nineteen, old enough to believe he understood how to do things well. Giboku Zenji had first gone to Kyoto to train, but he could not find a good teacher there and had come to Okayama when he heard that Master Gisan was an excellent teacher.

Giboku had been at Sogenji for only a short time when it became his turn to make the bath for the Roshi. The bathwater was a little too hot, so he brought buckets of water from the well and cooled the bath down. When it was sufficiently cool he set down the last bucket, in which a few drops of unused water remained.

Then, before going to bring more water, he dumped those last few drops out onto the ground. Since he was going to get more water, he probably thought those last few drops weren't necessary.

Gisan Zenrai Zenji saw that and said to him, "What did you just do?"

"I went to draw some water."

"Before you drew the water, what did you do?"

"I threw away some old water," Giboku answered simply.

"If you do training with a mind like that, no matter how much training you do or how long you train, you will not awaken. That bit of remaining water, if you dump it out there--how can it be used? If you take it outside and put it on some plants, then the plants will be given life, and the water will also be given life. If you give it to the cucumbers in the garden, the cucumbers will be helped and the water will be satisfied too!"

It is the work of one who is on the Path to give life to everything, but that cannot be done with such a lack of mindfulness. Giboku was reprimanded in that way. Since he was nineteen he had thought he understood already. When he was reprimanded he realized how little he actually understood and that something as simple as one drop of water, a single drop of water, had taught him that he had to start over again in his training. This he did, later becoming a great Zen Master.

Of course, today water is generally available, although there are still times and places where it is scarce. We often carelessly and thoughtlessly use water unnecessarily. As the raindrops fall from the sky, one after the next, they land on the leaves of the tree, or the trunk of the tree, or the stone wall, and only when all these drops come together can a small stream be born on the earth. These small streams meet and join, and with this gathering a river is born. When the waters of many rivers all join together, an ocean becomes possible.

To put it another way, the source of the ocean is the drop of rain that falls from the sky. One drop of water. Each and every one of these drops has its own functioning. A small amount of water has its functioning, and a large amount of water has its functioning. To be able to use the potential of any amount of water, be it large or small--this is our deep wisdom. To be able to make the best use of the potential of the amount of water we have is humans' wisdom.

Zen is the cultivation of the clear and deeply seeing eye that can know and appropriately act in each and every situation that comes along.

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