

The moon by the window has its usual appearance

Jinjō ichiyō sōzen no tsuki

尋常一様窓前月



The moon by the window has its usual appearance|
But put plum flowers there, and suddenly it's different

jin jo yo no tsuki
wazuka ni baika areba onaji karazu

This poem, from Daito Kokushi's Kaian Kokugo, first appeared in the Sodaisen Keishusen Keishi. It describes looking out the window at the moon and always seeing the same moon; but if a single bough of plum flowers is placed in front of the window, the moon changes completely.

Bankei Zenji lived from 1622 to 1693 and was known for teaching the Zen of the Unborn Mind. Bankei described his deep awakening, which occurred one morning when he went outside to wash his face. As he was washing, he smelled the scent of the plum, and everything that had been caught in his mind until then vanished. It was as if a barrel's bottom had fallen out, and all of his challenges--physical, spiritual, mental, and psychological--fell away at once. He was completely healed. In this way, Bankei Zenji wrote of his own experience.

When he was eleven years old he had heard it said that the path of Great Learning was to clarify Bright Virtue. From that moment, he inquired deeply about what Bright Virtue was and where it could be found. The path of Great Learning had been taught by Confucius. The world of morals and ethics was about reflecting upon that with which we were originally born. Confucius had written that this was the most important thing to be done. But Bankei was troubled by that particular phrase concerning the Bright Virtue of the path of Great Learning.

He wondered constantly, "Where in me is there something like Bright Virtue?" He could see only the boy who took money from his mother's purse and lied about it, who caught fish he wasn't supposed to and fought with the kids in the neighborhood. He could see himself only as a disobedient boy who was unreliable and always misbehaving. He was the leader of all the bullies and ruffians and was admonished and reprimanded by one and all. How could anyone like that have any such thing as a Bright Virtue to clarify in the first place?

For fourteen years he suffered with this insecurity and doubt, seeking out a path that would enable him to resolve it. He went to training with Master Unpo of Zuioji near Akoo, but this deep question about the path remained beyond his grasp. Traveling the whole of Japan, he sought different teachers and attempted assorted ascetic practices. Always training hard, he

followed ancient paths, staying in the forests, sleeping by the side of the roads, in fields, wherever his training took him. He did zazen under the trees in the heat of the day and the cold of the night, sitting in the wind, rain, and sleet, unconcerned about hunger or pain or discomfort. He was willing to throw away his life for his quest. Still, he couldn't resolve his profound doubt or rid himself of his confusion.

Finally, he returned to his hometown and built a small hut, one tatami mat square, near his family's house. He put up four walls, but there was no door, only a window just large enough to allow a bowl of food to be passed through and another for his excrement. Then he vowed not to leave the hut until he had died completely.

With this vow he sat and deepened, ripening. Using such great effort in his sitting without the benefit of exercise or the ability to move about, he became very ill. His body weakened, and he began to cough up great amounts of phlegm mixed with blood. One day he coughed up a huge plug that struck the wall in front of him, looking just like a rabbit turd. It slid down the wall to the floor. This is how Master Bankei wrote about the refining of his practice. As he watched that lump of phlegm and blood roll down the wall, he realized that, until then, he had been thinking there was something he had to clarify, something he had to understand. Suddenly, he knew that everything had always been aligned. He had almost killed himself making great efforts that weren't necessary. Finally, he saw this clearly.

In this way, at age twenty-six, Bankei Zenji was able to realize his deep clear mind. He was able to let go of all of his attachments and desires and doubts and become one with nature, entrusting everything. Within that clarified state of mind, he smelled the scent of the plum flower. He experienced an acute awareness not only of all vegetation but also of the rocks and other solid objects. He knew the sacred function of the huge universe, that there is something that can't be seen with the limited awareness of human beings' consciousness. He awakened to the eternal mind that unites everything. He knew from where this universe was born, why it exists, and where it flowed.

This is the Buddha. The universe as it is and all things in existence are the Buddha. "The shape of the willow tree is Kannon, and the wind in the pines is the teaching of the Buddha." Our desires, just as they are, are our Buddha Nature. Just as we are, we are enlightened; just as it is, our body is the Buddha. We must experience this. In olden days, people would do training and more training to realize that awareness in which there is no lingering self-consciousness. In this way we go beyond our self-conscious awareness to become one with the mind of the heavens and the earth.

The way of tea ceremony and the way of flower arranging, all of the various ancient paths, enable us to give life to our innate talents. We clarify and then clarify further, purifying and purifying, crushing the human self-conscious awareness, the small self, until the universe functions through us without any divisive ideas of cute, ugly, want, don't want.

We let go of our small mind and function in the ways of the heaven and the earth. We become that actual life energy. That is Buddha Nature. Then, every movement and action is prayer, and the ways of the Buddha are given life in our everyday activities. All true music, art, and dance arise from this place. Every single footstep and hand motion comes from a place where small-minded human ideas can't reach. This becomes clear.

Our intellectual ideas and dualistic interpretations are not what have most meaning. What is most important is to burn brightly in one straight line. When we experience our life energy dancing in one straight line, burning in complete combustion, this is what is called continuous clear mind moments.

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But put plum flowers there, and at once it's different

These words, describing something we taste often and clearly, are for those of the path.

As Master Bankei further says, "Everyone! I say to you—your parents all gave you birth. But that ego and dualistic thinking were not given birth to by your parents. Only your Buddha Nature was given by your parents to you.

"What is that Buddha Nature? It never has any expectation or plan. It always comes forth as new consciousness, deep and immeasurable, offering unlimited possibilities for functioning. Without thinking and dualistic expectations, in each place and on each occasion, it comes forth from our eyes and nose and ears and mouth, and the whole world jumps into us and everything is aligned. Now I'll show you proof!

"Look here! You're all gathered and listening to my talk. That's what you came here to do. But behind you there is a sparrow chirping, a dog barking, and a crow cawing. We can hear all those different sounds. Chirp, chirp! Bow-wow! Caw, caw! You didn't come here with the intention of hearing those sounds. Yet when the birds call, you hear their voices; when the dog barks, everyone here can hear it. That is because everyone is endowed with the exact same Buddha Nature. All of it arises from the Unborn mind."

We all like to collect things and want more and more of everything, but that's a big mistake. Choosing and preference are not our original mind. In original mind, everything is one and the same. Our original nature is deep and clear and bright--Buddha Nature exactly as it is. One who when seeing becomes the seeing, when hearing becomes the hearing, who becomes the very thing itself, is an eternal living Buddha.

There is nothing but this in the Buddha Dharma, and there is nothing beyond this. Any analysis we make about it is a mistake, only adding clutter after the fact.

The fragrance of the plum blossom is exactly the same whether smelled by an old person, a young person, a suspicious person, or a good person. We are all able to smell and see and hear directly, without adding in any distortions. When we live with no separation between ourselves and what we are experiencing, we know the truly bright and clear mind that is our original nature. But as long as we carry around an ego filter, it's impossible to live like this.

To clarify to this point is the Path of the Buddha. We have to throw away every speck of our ego and our small self and completely let go of everything we get caught on. Then, without giving any attention to it, with our original nature we see with our eyes and hear with our ears and taste with our mouth and feel with our body. When we let go of all of our notions and thoughts, we can receive this world with a fresh awareness and a true life energy. If it arises, we perceive it; if it doesn't arise, we have no awareness of it.

The moon is always shining brightly, but we have to see it ourselves, directly. When we know it deeply from our true mind, it's not just scenery but a slice of our own original nature.