



**From the Abbot, March 2015  
Yearning**

Emperor Taïso, who reigned from 960 to 976 during the Northern Sung dynasty, had a dream in which a deity appeared. The deity told him, "You must arouse your yearning for supreme enlightenment." The next morning His Majesty asked the official priest, "How can I arouse my yearning for supreme enlightenment?" The priest said not a word.

This story is told in Case 30 of *The Iron Flute*. Although in the ninth century the Chinese government had forbidden Buddhism and other "foreign" religions to be practiced, by the tenth century Chan (Zen) had become something of a state religion. The Sung dynasty, a time of great literature, saw the compilation of the koan collections *The Blue Cliff Record* and *The Gateless Barrier*. Emperor Taïso himself wrote a treatise on Buddhism.

So the emperor's mind was already receptive when a deity appeared in his dream urging him "to arouse his yearning for supreme enlightenment." He must have been strongly affected and deeply motivated.

Some of you may remember experiencing something mysterious -- perhaps in a dream, perhaps in some liminal state of awareness -- when you were very young, before you knew anything about Zen. You may have sensed an urgency to find out the real meaning of your existence, just as Prince Siddhartha felt urged to come out from behind those palace walls.

So your yearning was aroused, and eventually you started to sit. You may have discovered layer upon layer of scar tissue covering over emotional wounds; you persevered through years of open-heart surgery on the cushion.

You may also recall a dream in which an undeniable message lingered after you awakened. Perhaps a powerful force beckoned you to understand what could not be logically comprehended by the conscious mind. You may have had a lucid dream in which you glimpsed the pure, insubstantial awareness that lay behind the dream's content.

Once I dreamed I was listening to a group of people who were debating erudite points of Buddhist metaphysics, giving complicated explications, interpretations, and commentaries. I didn't know what they were talking about; I didn't want to know. In the dream, I told them, "But that's all beside the point. Beings are suffering. What's essential is to wake up." And I woke up.

Case 25 of *The Gateless Barrier* tells of Master Kyozan Ejaku's dream, in which he went to Maitreya's abode and was given the honorary third seat. A senior monk struck the wooden board with a gavel and said, "Today the person in the third seat will speak." In his dream, Kyozan stood up, struck the gavel, and said, "The truth of Mahayana is beyond the Four Propositions and transcends the Hundred Negations. Taicho! Taicho!" [Hear! Hear!] And he woke up.

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We tend to think that when we awaken from a dream, we return to reality. But what is real? In "The Bodhisattva's Vow," we chant, "When I, a student of Dharma, look at the real form of the universe, all is the never-failing manifestation of the mysterious truth of Tathagatha." To look at the real form of the universe is to see through appearances -- past the ever-changing forms that we mistakenly regard as substantial, and to which we give credence.

Evan Thompson, a cognitive scientist and philosopher who is the son of the famous cultural philosopher and poet William Irwin Thompson, recently came out with a fascinating book titled *Waking, Dreaming, Being*. He writes, "The dream world and the waking world both seem real and solid, yet in neither case do we realize that whatever we take to be real and solid is always a mode of appearance, something that appears real in one way or another, and that modes of appearance by their very nature can't be separated from the mind."

Through the clear awareness of Buddhist practice during our waking hours and through the development of lucid dreaming while we are sleeping, we can see appearances for what they are -- ever shifting modes of mind, in which our efforts to control, categorize, and make sense of anything are but the tales of an unreliable narrator.

It's not that we "deny the conventional reality of the waking world," Evan Thompson writes, but rather that we experience "a fundamental shift in our understanding of what it means for something to be real."

Through that shift, we can realize that what we have called "waking" turns out to be but a dream. The *Diamond Sutra* reminds us, "Think in this way of all this fleeting world: as a star at dawn, a bubble in a stream, a dewdrop, a flash of lightning in a summer cloud, a flickering lamp, a phantom, and a dream."

We're in a dream within a dream -- a play within a play, like Hamlet. Chuang-tzu wondered, "Am I a man who has awakened from a dream in which I was a butterfly, or am I a butterfly dreaming I am a man?"

In lucid dreams, we have access to the unconscious; in deep and luminous zazen, we can awaken from the dream to "the real form of the universe." The mind opens to that which lies behind the curtain of objective consciousness.

The performance artist, poet, and Buddhist practitioner Laurie Anderson put it this way:

It was a large room.  
Full of people.  
All kinds.  
And they had all arrived at the same building at more or less the same time.  
And they were all free.  
And they were all asking themselves the same question:  
What is behind that curtain?  
You were born.  
And so you're free.  
So happy birthday.

What is it to be born into true freedom? A master of old said, "With holy ones, dreams and wakefulness are one and the same stream." And Sosan Zenji, in his poem "On Believing in Mind," said, "If an eye never falls asleep, all dreams by themselves cease." When the Dharma eye opens, whether dreaming or waking, the mind stream of awakening flows ceaselessly.

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A well-known story illustrates this: Once Shakyamuni Buddha was walking down a village street. Struck by his presence, a villager asked, "Are you a god?" The Buddha said, "No." "Are you an angel?" "No." "Then what are you?" The Buddha said, "I am awake."

Nyogen Senzaki commented on Case 30 of *The Iron Flute*: "What is ultimate enlightenment? How does one know that one is yearning for supreme enlightenment? When Buddha Shakyamuni attained his realization, he saw all sentient beings with deep compassion. He sought their welfare and deliverance. Buddha exemplified the true nature of supreme enlightenment. The fourfold vow is what arouses the yearning for supreme enlightenment and is what verifies it."

We chant the fourfold vow each day: "However innumerable sentient beings are, I vow to save (free) them all / However inexhaustible delusions are, I vow to extinguish them all / However immeasurable Dharma teachings are, I vow to master them all / However endless the Buddha's Way is, I vow to follow it." When we really take this to heart, it naturally arouses great aspiration, and great yearning to awaken for all beings.

But when Emperor Taisho woke up from his dream and asked the official priest, "How can I arouse my yearning?" the priest remained silent.

There are many kinds of silence. When a non-Buddhist philosopher went to the Buddha and said, "I do not ask for words; I do not ask for non-words," the Buddha just sat, in radiant oneness, and the philosopher was illuminated (*The Gateless Barrier*, Case 32). Vimalakirti, after hearing one bodhisattva after another speak about how to enter the gate of nonduality, just sat, in the thunderous silence of nonduality. A Zen master in a koan, when asked a question, remained silent -- holding fast. Numerous times, however, when someone is asked an urgent question, the silence that ensues betrays uncertainty and confusion, and is not at all helpful.

Of course, fundamentally, nothing can be said; no one can tell another how to awaken; there is no formula for supreme enlightenment. Whatever we say will be fodder for dualistic conceptualization. And yet, as the Buddha taught, skillful means must be used. The official priest could say nothing, but was this the enlightened nothing of holding fast? Or was this the nothing of embarrassed befuddlement?

Each one of us, when we truly take up the fourfold vow, cannot help but see "all sentient beings with deep compassion" and seek "their welfare and deliverance," as Nyogen Senzaki said -- their yearning for liberation. Coming from the confidence and the humility of no-self, we must respond.