


 ask a godo

MOKUHO GUY MERCIER REPLIES

**Question: “What is ku?”**

Someone from the British sangha has asked the question that a godo does not really want to answer. It is very difficult, in fact, to explain in a few lines what is covered by this word that refers to the foundation of the universe, the essence of each thing, ultimate reality, what religions have called ‘God’, giving it dozens of different names to try to make it accessible to everyone. A blank page would be a good reply, but let’s try with words all the same.

Ku is the transcription of the Sanskrit word sunya or sunyata, literally translated as ‘emptiness’, a mysterious abstract idea to a Westerner brought up in the theistic and materialistic Judaeo-Christian tradition. In his kusens on the Hannya shin gyo that have just been published in English (translated by Ilsa), Master Deshimaru gives it many meanings: “In origin, sunyata is sūvi which indicates expansion, centrifugal motion, a little like a soap bubble swelling but staying empty inside. It is also zero, existence without noumenon, devoid of identifiable substance, the non-existence of the subjective and the objective, the plenitude of emptiness, original mind ...”. Bodhidharma, questioned by Emperor Wu about ultimate truth, replied: “An unfathomable emptiness and nothing sacred.”

True Nature of the world, Absolute Reality, Fundamental Reality, Absolute Principle, Original Source, Supreme Truth, Essential Awakening, many are the names that the masters have used to describe the One Reality. “Buddha” is perhaps the simplest name for us: “Buddha is Mind and Mind is Buddha.”

With all these definitions, the novice practitioner, approaching Buddhism through a meditation that is sometimes difficult, is perplexed and has difficulty really understanding why Ku is the central concept of Buddhism. Moreover, according to the explanations given in books and dictionaries, the concept of ‘Ku, emptiness’ has been studied, discussed and argued all through the centuries, giving birth to movements, theories and schools disagreeing on the means of arriving at the experience of Ku, Emptiness. This is discouraging or at least leaves us perplexed!

In Mahayana Buddhism to which the zen school belongs, Ku is Reality, one,

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infinite, eternal, the non-manifest cosmic potential, unchanging in nature, transcendent and immanent in all things at once. This Reality is present at the very heart of the infinite number of things, shiki, ephemeral and temporary phenomena which appear and disappear in It. “Shiki sokuze Ku”, essence is not distinct from phenomena, is the leitmotif, the recurrent theme of the Hannya shin gyo and the Mahayana teachings.

If we could simplify it, we might say that Ku is our true nature, Buddha nature, omnipresent in form and in the body, sensations, perceptions and all sorts of mental formations. And the only question which is then still important for us, is “how to awaken to Ku, emptiness?”, to Reality, and finally to put an end to searching and suffering. As it says in the first sentence of the Hannya shin gyo, it is in awakening to Emptiness, Ku, that Avalokitesvara becomes the bodhisattva of freedom.

Human beings seek happiness in this life-incarnation (appearing-disappearing of existence) but what they really seek is themselves, or God, or original mind - it comes to the same thing. The problem is that they seek where they can never find it, in an ignorant state of consciousness based on the idea of seeking, that is, in a continual movement of perfecting over time, projecting into a future which never arrives. Suffering and malaise are born of this seeking that can never achieve its goal. When we begin to understand this, we are ready (even sometimes without knowing it) for the U-turn towards the self in which we come to see things differently. And without

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really understanding, we find ourselves sitting in a zen dojo facing the wall! And this can become the miracle and reveal the purpose of our existence: in the stillness and silence of our own zazen posture, the Reality of Ku is unveiled.

This revelation comes on condition that we stop taking our reference from the ignorant consciousness that we take for ourselves and that continues to want to seek, seize and name. Paradoxically, to find what we are searching for, we must abandon the search itself. The attitude of awakening to what we are passes through the “Shin jin datsu raku” of Master Nyojo: body and mind abandoned. No more identifying with anything, no more individual, no more ego, but only Ku manifesting as Buddha sitting, simply sitting. This abandoning is not something that we obtain through effort. The vision of Ku comes to pass. Ku manifests to Itself, including all opposites, through the least movement of form and manifest consciousness. We do not have the experience of Original Mind (Ku), Buddha Nature, Emptiness. It is Original Mind that reveals itself to itself at the heart of our body-mind when there is no longer anybody there (muga, non-ego) to have the experience.

continued on page 14

continued from page 11

For those who remain attached to the phenomenal world, Ku is an abstract, unreal concept, ungraspable by thought. They are fascinated by the world, but experience it as a threat, a battlefield. The desire for the world and its objects is never free of the fear of being swallowed up by it, which nevertheless is bound to happen.

For those who are awakened to the inner silence, to Ku, Emptiness, stillness, it is the phenomenal world that could be called unreal and all that happens in it is like the play of shadows. "All phenomena are shadows of Ku," wrote Master Deshimaru. Or to use another metaphor: the world is a trembling (the movement of waves) on the surface of Consciousness (the ocean).

In fact, nothing is separate from anything. What is real, Ku, is Being itself, Original Mind, Pure Consciousness, of which the world is the temporal manifestation, Life. Ku and shiki cannot be dissociated; not-two.

In the heart of meditation, without expectation, without goal, free of ego, the awakened consciousness is one with Original Mind. This is its natural state, a silent presence freed of a subject that looks or perceives, "pure awareness of the presence of self", said Buddha. We could say that Ku, Original Mind, becomes aware of Itself (perceives itself) in Itself, that is, in the form that manifests in It.

In the end, the silence at the heart of meditation is the ultimate answer.

My Mind is my best friend.  
We eat together,  
We walk together,  
We sleep together.  
(Anna Do So)

A large, stylized calligraphic character in grey ink, representing the Japanese character for 'Ku' (空), which means 'emptiness' or 'void'. The character is written in a fluid, expressive style with varying line thicknesses and some ink bleed-through effects.

Translated by Rosemary Cottis

