

Bring Me the Rhinoceros: And Other Zen Koans to Bring You Joy

By John Tarrant

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Bring Me the Rhinoceros is an unusual guide to happiness and a can opener for your thinking. For fifteen hundred years, Zen koans have been passed down through generations of masters, usually in private encounters between teacher and student. This book deftly retells fourteen traditional koans, which are partly paradoxical questions dangerous to your beliefs and partly treasure boxes of ancient wisdom. Koans show that you don't have to impress people or change into an improved, more polished version of yourself. Instead you can find happiness by unbuilding, unmaking, throwing overboard, and generally subverting unhappiness. John Tarrant brings the heart of the koan tradition out into the open, reminding us that the old wisdom remains as vital as ever, a deep resource available to anyone in any place or time.

“Here’s a book to crack the happiness code if ever there was one. Forget about self-improvement, five-point plans, and inspirational seminars that you can’t remember a word of a week later. Tarrant’s is the fix that fixes nothing because there is nothing to fix. Your life is a koan, a deep question whose answer you are already living—this is the true inspiration, and Tarrant delivers.”—Roger Housden, author of the *Ten Poems* series

“Every life is full of koans, and yet you can’t learn from a book how to understand them. You need someone to put you in the right frame of mind to see the puzzles and paradoxes of your experience. With intelligence, humor, and steady, deep reflection, John Tarrant does this as no one has done it before. This book could take you to a different and important level of experience.”—Thomas Moore, author of *Care of the Soul* and *Dark Nights of the Soul*

“*Bring Me the Rhinoceros* is one of the best books ever written about Zen. But it is more than that: it is a book of Zen, pointing us to reality by its own fluent and witty example. John Tarrant has the rare ability to enter the minds of the ancient Zen masters as they do their amazing pirouettes upon the void and, with a few vivid touches, to illuminate our lives with their sayings.”—Stephen Mitchell, author of *Gilgamesh: A New English Version*

“This book’s straightforward honesty, clear writing, and destabilizing insight have a profound effect. John Tarrant does indeed bring on the rhinoceros and a host of other powerful but invisible creatures, ready to run us down when we refuse to acknowledge the fierce, awkward, and beautiful world we inhabit”—David Whyte, author of *Crossing the Unknown Sea*

“John Tarrant’s talent for telling these classic Zen tales transforms them magically into a song in which, as you read, the words disappear as the music continues to echo in your mind and make you happy. Mysteriously, like koans.”
—Sylvia Boorstein, author of *Pay Attention, for Goodness’ Sake*

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Editorial Review

About the Author

John Tarrant was born in Tasmania and worked in the antiquated copper smelters there, writing poetry after his shift. Later he was a fisherman on the Great Barrier Reef and a lobbyist for Aboriginal land rights before graduating from the Australian National University.

A Zen teacher who has practiced Jungian psychotherapy for twenty years and studied koans for thirty, Tarrant now directs Pacific Zen Institute, a venture in meditation and the arts, as well as teaching culture change in organizations. He is the author of *The Light Inside the Dark*. He lives among the vineyards near Santa Rosa, California, and can be reached at johntarrant@earthlink.net.

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CHAPTER 1

Bodhidharma's Vast Emptiness

Emperor Wu of Liang asked the great master Bodhidharma,

"What is the main point of this holy teaching?"

"Vast emptiness, nothing holy," said Bodhidharma.

"Who are you, standing in front of me?" asked the emperor.

"I do not know," said Bodhidharma.

The emperor didn't understand. Bodhidharma crossed the Yangtze River and went to the kingdom of Wei.

Later, the emperor raised this matter with his advisor, Duke Zhi. The advisor asked,

"Your Majesty, do you know who that Indian sage was?"

"No I don't," said the emperor.

"That was Avalokiteshvara, the Bodhisattva of Compassion, carrying the seal of the Buddha's heart and mind."

The emperor felt a sudden regret and said, "Send a messenger to call him back."

Duke Zhi told him, "Your Majesty, even if everyone in the kingdom went after him he wouldn't return."

FORGETTING WHO YOU ARE AND MAKING USE OF NOTHING

To study the Buddha's way is to study the self,
to study the self is to forget the self.
To forget the self is to be awakened
by ten thousand things.

Eihei Dogen

Poetry arrived
to look for me. I don't know, I don't know where
it came from, from winter or river,
I don't know how or when,
No there weren't voices, there weren't words, or silence.

Pablo Neruda

If you are in a tight spot and nothing has worked, you probably think that you need a transcendent piece of wisdom to rely on. You might think that you need a foothold or a handhold. You might think that you need to improve yourself or your skills in some way. Here is a koan that suggests another possibility: the way through might be by not improving yourself and not finding a railing to take hold of. Here is a koan about how the way through can appear naturally if you are open to it taking an unfamiliar shape. This koan also contains the legend about how this understanding was brought to China from India.

The Koan

Bodhidharma's Vast Emptiness

Emperor Wu had two unusual experiences that changed his life. These essentially inward events led him to certain achievements that are remembered today, more than a millennium after his death. The first experience happened when his armies had to repel an invasion of horsemen from the northwest. The horsemen carried with them whatever they owned, and they weren't afraid to die. The emperor had himself ascended to the throne in the standard way, by overthrowing the previous, weakened monarch, and he believed that he understood the riders. To steady his troops he visited the front lines and sat in the firelight on a small hill. This is when the emperor had his first peculiar experience.

Banners whipped loudly overhead and the wind felt as though it were inside his chest, tearing and banging. Something of the desert's tedious immensity was conveyed to him. The wind cleansed him of any anxiety and also took away other things the solidity of which he had never questioned before. It took away his august rank and his name. He stopped planning, and he also stopped thinking about the outcome of the battle. When everything he usually depended upon was gone, he knew immediately what to do. In the predawn, just before the nomads liked to attack, he sent horsemen into the center of their camp and immediately pulled them back again. As the pursuit came, the center of his line kept falling back. The nomads rode into the vacuum he had opened and he closed on them from both sides.

After his return, while the ministers celebrated, the emperor went into the garden to be alone. On the hillside, he had felt quite certain that he was going to win. At that moment, in the wind and the vast land, he was small and unimportant, and this sense of his unimportance allowed him to be clear about what needed to be done. Being important now seemed to him to be just a prejudice that confined him.

Once he forgot about having a special point to his life, he felt remarkably free for an emperor. There were

some complications. On certain days he considered leaving his room but couldn't find a reason to. He still gave interviews at court before dawn but was sometimes beset by a sense of unreality. Shedding his old beliefs had not been so hard. He hadn't done anything to achieve his new way of seeing things; it was a gift from wind and war. Having opinions about life--ideas about being an emperor, about his own dignity and the motives of his ministers, having to dislike this person and admire that one--pained him now; he could feel these familiar attitudes as walls crowding around him. Yet some understanding, he was certain, eluded him. He did what was necessary out of duty and didn't mourn his old certainties, but he lacked delight. There had to be more to life than the freedom of pointlessness.

The emperor sought hints from the world. He noticed that he had remorse about the murders involved in his ascent to the throne. His qualms, as he thought of them, were the beginning of a new curiosity about his own life. At the same time he began to entertain famous teachers who passed through. Sometimes they were helpful. They usually praised him and gave carefully bland advice, often involving diets. Sometimes it was even good advice, but the question he had was something like a feeling--a mingling of excitement and uneasiness hard to formulate--and advice didn't seem to touch it.

Then the emperor heard of a sage from India. The man was himself a legend; it was said that it had taken him three years to make his way over the seas. The emperor knew nothing about the sea, but he imagined waves as the grass of the steppes in a high wind. He tried thinking of China as an ocean that he passed through, and nomads as pirates with horses. Though his own obligations prevented him from undertaking such journeys, he respected this kind of solitary accomplishment.

When this sage arrived at court, he turned out to be a genuine barbarian: red hair, blue eyes, dressed in rags. His name was Bodhidharma, which was not really a personal name, just some sort of title in Sanskrit. The clothes of the ministers were gorgeous, and in the red-and-gold audience room the visitor managed to seem nondescript, which was an achievement for a barbarian. He didn't have the air of one deprived or poor; the main contrast with the ministers was not in how he dressed. In a place where everyone wanted something, he did not. The ministers' rank was displayed by differences in insignia and dress; the sage made no claims about rank. He didn't either push himself forward into the emperor's notice or pull himself back into hiding. He stood quietly, and his presence affected the court until everyone fell silent. The emperor noticed that his own thoughts were becoming simple; he remembered the taste of vegetable soup.

"Even the most elegant palace," thought the emperor, "is also a burden." Then he stood up as if to approach the visitor's stillness. He wanted to find a road deeper into his own life, and asked,

"I have funded many monasteries; what merit have I earned?"

"No merit," said Bodhidharma.

With a jolt, the emperor thought, "Here is someone who knows! It's not about building things up. It's about undoing everything." He realized that he had fallen into being an emperor again and underestimated the sage and perhaps himself. He had not dared to ask a question important to his own life. The memory of a hillside and a battle rose up in him. He had had no language for what he had undergone, had had no one to stand beside him and say, "Yes, I see it too!" Now the emperor felt the man's presence as a kind of sympathy, which he longed to explore.

"What is the main point of this holy teaching?"

"Vast emptiness, nothing holy," said Bodhidharma.

Again the quiet voice that didn't ask to be heard. The emperor's senses became keen. It was as if the two men were sitting together on a bench in a temple garden with all the time in the world. He wanted to reach the other man's mind, or perhaps go deeper into his own mind. An odd thought came to him: "If I'm an emperor, how can I also be a person?" So he asked, "Who are you, standing in front of me?"

"I do not know," said Bodhidharma.

This statement stopped the emperor completely. He began to feel a delightful insubstantiality. The emperor's sadness over the shameful things he had done fell away, it fell into that emptiness. The emperor's worry over when more attacks would come from the north also disappeared. Inside himself he couldn't find an emperor.

He felt capable of many things but not quite yet; the words "I don't know, I don't know" stuck in his head like a line from a song. For a moment, he walked alone and was content. Around him, emptiness flowed in all directions. Then, as he looked about, the palace returned and the court officials started to whisper to each other. He was fascinated by how clear everything was. Someone else spoke, and Bodhidharma began to withdraw, as if he were himself a spell that had been lifted. If he had stayed, "I don't know" might have lost its power. In the court, only one person noted his going.

Later, the emperor raised this matter with his advisor, Duke Zhi. The advisor asked, "Your Majesty, do you know who that Indian sage was?"

"No, I don't," said the emperor, realizing how much emperors take for granted.

"That was Avalokiteshvara, the Bodhisattva of Compassion, carrying the seal of the Buddha's heart and mind."

The emperor felt a sudden regret and said, "Send a messenger to call him back."

Duke Zhi told him, "Your Majesty, even if everyone in the kingdom went after him he wouldn't return...."

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