



The Gateless Gate

*When one passes through
this gateless gate, he walks
freely between heaven and earth.*

Mumon Ekai (1183-1260)

IT IS A TIMELESS, PERHAPS EVEN A universal parable, found in many diverse religions, myths, and cultures—sometimes appearing even in our most private dreams.

A traveller finds his journey blocked by a great wall, stretching off in both directions as far as the eye can see. Searching for a door, he soon discovers a gate in the wall, and stepping through it, he suddenly finds himself in a new world—a world at once completely different and strangely familiar.

Turning around to look back through the gate that he just passed through, he finds that not only is there now no gate, but there is no wall!...Not only is there no going back, there is no *there* to go back to.

The parable is, of course, a metaphor for spiritual awakening. The seeker feels that he has *gone beyond*, but all he has really gone beyond is the illusion that there was any *where* to go, any *thing* to go beyond.

If there was any journey that needed to be made, any change that needed to happen, it was an inner journey and a change of mind.

Earnest pilgrims or idle wanderers who have made this journey before us would counsel that there is no single way such a extraordinary transformation can occur.

For some, it happens abruptly, instantly, effortlessly—arising out of stillness, like waking up from sleep—a sudden insight that once seen, cannot be unseen.

For others, it follows a lifetime of diligent, spiritual searching, appearing as a gradual, almost imperceptible deepening rather than a sudden, life-altering metamorphosis.

What both paths have in common is that this awakening, this understanding, appears unexpectedly, coming naturally and spontaneously from the ‘other side,’ and can in no way be achieved by working at it from ‘this side’ of the wall—because there is no wall, and furthermore, *no one* to work at it.

The wall is, once again, a metaphor, and all metaphors fall short of expressing the truth, like a finger pointing at the moon. If you were to take your dog out for a walk at night and entreatingly point at the moon, your dog would likely anxiously stare at your finger, foolishly—if perhaps rather endearingly—awaiting your next command.

We might laugh, but are we really all that different?...We too mistake the finger for the moon, unable to see that stories, rituals, practices, teachers, spiritual ‘experiences’—all these are only pointers, of no importance in themselves. To truly liberate ourselves, we must look beyond all these signposts and see what they are all pointing us *toward*.

So, how exactly does one pass through the ‘gateless gate?’...Is there nothing at all one can do to invite the appearance of a break in our mental walls? A lifetime of conditioning assures us that only great effort and striving will lead us to liberation and freedom from struggle, but the promised land on the ‘other side’ of the wall never seems to appear.

Perhaps one signpost can be found in the words of a 13th century Chinese Zen monk, Wumen Huikai (in Japanese, Mumon Ekai), who compiled and wrote a commentary on a collection of 48 koans or riddles in 1228, obligingly called *The Gateless Gate*.

The common theme of all the koans is the examination of the mind’s bondage to dualistic concepts, the ‘gateless gate’ being the intentional blocking of any avenue of escape for the rational, ceaselessly thinking mind.

The koans themselves are dispensable tools, meant to be used, as Ekai wrote, “as a man who picks up a piece of brick to knock at a gate, and after the gate is opened the brick is useless and is thrown away.”

Still, the practitioner must meditate on them diligently, for “if he hesitates one moment, he is as a person watching from a small window for a horseman to pass by, and in a wink he has missed seeing.”

It is the fundamental nature of the mind to discriminate, to divide the world into good and bad, black and white, right and wrong. In fact, many spiritual teachers (and even some cognitive scientists) would suggest that this discriminating function of the mind actually *defines* the mind, and it may even be what brings the material world of opposites as we experience it into existence.

In any case, while making distinctions is all well and good (and certainly necessary in order to function in the world and in society), if we cling to opposites as if they were absolutes, as reflections of a deeper reality rather than just relative terms, we see only our own reflection in the mirror.

Whether it happens through serendipity or through the appearance of effort, once a seeker finds the gateless gate—which is, after all, right in front him, open wide all the time—he strides through it boldly and confidently, leaving no tracks behind.

Looking back, he sees no-thing, only perfect stillness, emptiness and clarity, for that is the fundamental nature of the mind, undisturbed by dualistic concepts.

The spiritual pilgrim has arrived home laughing, realizing that he never left home in the first place. Only now, he carries with him the understanding that ‘enlightenment’ is not something that you can achieve.

It is the absence of something. ■