

Long ago, an old master in China named Isan, gathered his students together and said, “Two hundred years after I’m dead a water buffalo will be born in this valley. On the side of the buffalo will be the character for my name, Isan. Now tell me will you call that creature a water buffalo or will you call it Isan?” What was that old master asking his students? What’s the point of a story like that? Old stories like these are koans in which the student is often asked to present some solution to the question being asked. The danger is that we turn them into riddles; we want to know quickly how to answer them. It’s more important that we understand rather than go into what’s being asked. What’s the question? Don’t be in such a hurry for the answer.

The story is taking place at a time and in a culture where there’s a literal belief in reincarnation; where you could hypothetically imagine a person being reborn as an animal. By and large, the notion of reincarnation in modern day Buddhism has become a metaphor. I think there are some cultures—particularly the Tibetan culture—where they have a more literal conception of reincarnation. But in the Japanese Buddhist lineages in which I’ve trained, we would take a story like this as a metaphor. A modern Japanese master, Shohaku Okamura, has said, “I don’t really believe that we transmigrate between lives, but I know we definitely transmigrate within this life.” That’s really the key to what’s being asked here. What does it mean to say that we transmigrate; that we get reincarnated within this life?

In the story they use two hundred years, and another lifetime, and another creature as a way of illustrating the radical shifts in ourselves that we all experience—not over two hundred years but over two or three seconds. There could be radical changes in how we feel, who we are, and how we behave moment after moment. Are we the same person or not as we shift between these states?

Psychologists call these shifts, shifts in self states. We can think of them not just as a shift in our mood, but as a shift in our whole identity or social role. You can think of the difference of how you are with your mother, versus how you are with your wife, versus

how you are with your child, versus how you are with a student or friend. The way you hold yourself, organize yourself, and think about yourself, can change pretty radically. Anybody who goes home for the holidays can watch some radical self state shifts going on.

How do we deal with that? How do we think about that? As I’ve said before, our tendency is to think that we can stand back as an observer, survey the various range of self states that we go through as if it’s a menu, and decide which are the good ones, the bad ones, and the ones we want to occupy. We can’t. We’ve got this whole range of variation on display. In one way or another we have to come to terms with it. In this koan, when he talks about being reincarnated as a water buffalo, you could say that’s a pretty drastic kind of thing to have to come to terms with. If you think about it literally, it sounds Kafkaesque. It’s like being reborn as a cockroach. What would it mean to have a human consciousness and an animal body?

Yet, I think we all undergo something like that—or at least something just as terrifying—when we wake up and we’re old. It’s like, how did I get in this old body? Or when we’re sick, all of the sudden we find ourselves occupying a body in a state that can feel radically “not me.” We can do all sorts of things to try to hold onto some ongoing state of health or a particular mood or attitude. We might say, “No matter what happens to me, whether I’m old or sick or alone, I’m still going to be able to feel that I’m still me in the midst of all that.” Well, yes and no. That’s the lesson of this kind of koan. Yes and no.

There’s an old saying, “wherever you go, there you are.” Somehow there’s something about you that you bring to every situation, your own particular stake or style. There are good sides and bad sides to that. There’s a sense of identity and continuity, but there’s also what psychoanalysts call transference; you start seeing everybody like your mother or you see everybody as a replay of some old experience. You can have continuity at the price of having no new experience whatsoever because everything is another version of something that’s happened before.

There’s another expression, “you can’t step into the same river twice.” That says not only is the river changing moment to moment, but also you are changing moment to moment. You can’t be the same person stepping into the same river. We hear that and we all nod our heads and nod exactly the way we nodded our head at the expression wherever you go, there you are. They both sound right! Yet, they’re saying exactly the opposite things. What do we do with that? Do you see it as a contradiction or as a fact that self is not a thing with different attributes that we have to sort out? Does it have these or does it have those? We use the word self in all these different contexts and associations and it has not fixed, single meaning. It’s simply the grammar of all these different uses sometimes describing the subjective experience of continuity in our lives and sometimes expressing the feeling of discontinuity and change, some times radical change and discontinuity.

Sometimes the buffalo is taken with a different connotation because the buffalo in this story is also the same animal as the ox in the ox herding pictures. People will look at that story and say the being reincarnated as an ox with the name Isan on the side, the ox is some picture of Buddha nature that’s just taking this particular form. There is some underlying essence that keeps taking new shapes or manifestations.

I think that the core lesson of Buddhism was that everything is impermanent and subject to change. There is no deep-down, final unchanging, essential permanent, layer that goes through metamorphosis; it’s just the changes themselves.

When we try to come to terms with finding ourselves in a new state or in a new body, we have to resolve this koan. Am I the same or am I different? What does it mean to fully embrace this moment as who you are? That’s the challenge of it. The temptation is to see there is me and this is now happening to me, and to put some separation between that. It’s different to say, “I am what is happening now,” to fully be this person—the one that’s in this body and this mind. If you’re going to do that with a buffalo, how do you do it? You’ve got to grow horns and a tail. You’ve got to completely occupy the body and life

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of that buffalo. What’s the equivalent in your life right now? Who do you have to be?
How do you fully express being who you are right now in this moment in this body?