

FOXES AND KARMA 28 AUG



At the heart of Oppenheimer lies the story of Baizhang (or to give him his Japanese name, Hyakujo) and the fox. It is a story about the law of cause and effect (karma) and it is the pivot on which the play turns. In this story an old priest, mistaking the true nature of the law of cause and effect, becomes a fox for 500 life-times; eons later, when he comes to understand true nature of the law of cause and effect he is restored once more to human form.

Like the old priest in the story, Oppenheimer (who at first also appears in the guise of an old priest) falls into an endless painful round of birth and death as a result of a fundamental mistake about the law of cause and effect. Unable to leave this life because of unresolved anguish, he becomes a ghost, condemned to return to Hiroshima each year on the eve of the dropping of the bomb, and there to suffer the very agonies that his bomb caused. Here is what he says at the moment that he reveals that he is not in fact a priest, but the ghost of Robert Oppenheimer

*I know all too well what it means to be reborn as a fox.
To be bound to the eternal wheel of birth and death.
Drawn here every year to enter the fires,
To suffer unspeakably, and pass away.
But then reborn once more upon the wheel of karma.*

My agonies grow stronger lifetime after lifetime.

I am in fact the ghost of Oppenheimer.

In the second act of the play, after much prompting from his interlocutor, the pilgrim, he finally comes to understand the true nature law of cause and effect—that karma cannot be evaded under any circumstances—and acting on that knowledge is he freed from his ghostly existence, just as the old priest was released from his fox lives.

Foxes figure prominently in the play, not just with the Noh, but also within the ai-kyogen, the 'comic' interlude that separates the two acts of the play.



Mask by Kitazawa Hideta, generously loaned by Matsui Akira

Here is the story of Baizhang/Hyakujo and the fox as it occurs as Case 2 of The Gateless Gate (Wumenguan/Mumonkan), a collection of koans assembled by the Chinese Chan/Zen master, Wumen Huikai (無門慧開; Japanese: Mumon Ekai; 1183–1260) and published in 1228. This collection of koan cases is one of the foundational texts of Zen Buddhism.

Once when Baizhang/Hyakujo gave a series of talks, a certain old man was always there listening together with the monks. When they left, he would leave too. One day, however, he remained behind. Baizhang asked him, “Who are you, standing here before me?”

The old man replied, “I am not a human being. In the far distant past, in the time of Kasyapa Buddha, I was head priest at this mountain. One day a monk asked me, “Does an enlightened person fall under the law of cause and effect or not?” I replied, “Such a person does not fall under the law of cause and effect.” With this I was reborn five hundred times as a fox. Please say a turning word for me and release me from the body of a fox.”

He then asked Baizhang/Hyakujo, “Does an enlightened person fall under the law of cause and effect or not?”

Baizhang/Hyakujo said, “Such a person does not obscure the law of cause and effect.”

Hearing this, the old man was immediately enlightened.

For me, this is one of the most important of all koans. It resonates deeply within my own personal history. Throughout its history, and particularly in eighth century China—around the time of the protagonist in our story, Baizhang Huaihai ((Chinese: 百丈懷海; Japanese: Hyakujō Ekai) (720–814), the Chan/Zen tradition has warned against the danger of misconstruing the nature of 'emptiness' (Śūnyatā in Sanskrit). Realisation of the empty one world, or 'enlightenment' as it is sometimes called, lies at the heart of Zen practice. It is the gate (the 'gateless gate') through which Zen students must pass in order for their practice to become genuine.

But seeing into the insubstantiality of all things and the boundlessness of Buddha nature can be a dangerous business, particularly for the novice. It is all too easy, once a student has had some experience of emptiness, for a dichotomy to spring up, a new dualism that pits the relative world and the empty world against one another— a dichotomy that pits cause and effect against the realisation of emptiness. The student may become careless about relative world, the world in which karma operates, and as a result real damage may be done, to themselves, to their loved ones, or even society more broadly. Hence the old man's question, 'Does an enlightened person fall under the law of cause and effect or not.' Answering 'no' the old man falls into 500 lives as a fox. Realising that the law of cause and effect can never be evaded, the old man is restored to human form.

What has this to do with Robert Oppenheimer? Fundamental to the play is the conceit that there is an equivalence between the old man's misunderstanding of the law of karma, his falling into his fox lives, and his eventual redemption, and Oppenheimer's misunderstanding of the law of karma, his falling into his lives as a tormented ghost and his eventual redemption. This is presented in a pair of shidai movements sung by the chorus.

*Deluded by emptiness, Hyakujo misspeaks
Deluded by emptiness, Hyakujo misspeaks
And is reborn five hundred times as a fox.*

*Deluded by emptiness, Oppenheimer falls
Deluded by emptiness, Oppenheimer falls
Falls into error and thus fathers a sin.*

The Dalai Lama has said that one of the key issues facing science is the mysterious relationship between the world of conventional physics, where time, space and causality operate ;'normally' and the quantum world of sub-atomic figures, where time and space collapse, and causality ceased to function. Buddhism has grappled productively with the relationship between the relative and the absolute worlds for more than a millennium. The story of Hyakujo and the fox is just one such struggle. The parallel between Hyakujo's becoming a fox for five hundred life times as the result of mistaking this relationship and Oppenheimer's becoming a ghost condemned to suffer the fire-hells of Hiroshima for life time rests upon the idea that their mistake was fundamentally the same. Was Oppenheimer so consumed by the beauty of sub-atomic physics that a key moral dimension was lost.

Here is the beginning of the Kuse movement.

*So seductive; so existentially sweet
To dice with God's building blocks: fragments of atoms,
Unborn, undying, boundless, unmoving.
Flash of light on water, stars in the heavens,
Mountains, rivers, trees, grasses, the myriad beings,
All dance like this, unmoving, without substance.
Dazzled by the beauty of this empty world,
Oppenheimer turned his gaze from all that is human.*

The key to Oppenheimer's release from his ghostly torment and Hyakujo's release from his fox-life torment is understanding the nature of this mistake. Understanding correctly, Hyakujo once again becomes a man. Correctly understanding karma, Oppenheimer is released from his ghostly existence, meets Fudo and becomes an agent of liberation, rather than an agent of suffering.

Fudo says to Oppenheimer:

*I wield the sword of freedom. I liberate all beings.
I wield the rope to ensnare all mistaken views.
By my power this humble pilgrim brought you to me
Take now these weapons that all may be freed from pain.*

Taking Fudo's sword and snare, Oppenheimer dances for the liberation of all beings from suffering.

He sings:

*Unmoving midst the flames I dance to save you all
Unmoving midst the flames I dance to save you all*

And as he dances, the chorus sings

*One stroke of Fudô's sword:
Cuts away five hundred lives of error.
Snared by Fudô's rope:*

Foxes and demons lose their power.

Each flash of sword

Cuts off ignorance.

Each cast of snare

Brings peace to tortured hearts.

Dancing for all beings,

The great unmoving one

Dancing for all beings,

The great unmoving one.