

The True Ch'ien

IN ROBERT AITKEN'S TRANSLATION of the *Mumonkan*,* a collection of Zen koans, there is a ghost story from the folk tradition of Tang dynasty China: "Ch'ien and her spirit are separated. Which is the true Ch'ien?" There are various translations, but their essence is pretty much the same.

The story is of a beautiful little girl named Ch'ien who was dear to her father's heart, especially since her older sister had died. As a child Ch'ien played so nicely with her boy cousin that her father said, "You two should marry when you are older." The cousins took that to indicate they were betrothed, and as they grew older they fell in love. When it came time for her to marry, however, her father, having long since forgotten his earlier comment, selected another young man for her.

Ch'ien and the young man she loved, Chau, were desolate. He couldn't bear to be near her anymore, so he soon boarded a boat and left. As he was going upriver he heard footsteps on the bank running alongside the boat and, to his delight, turned to see Ch'ien coming after him. Happily they went off together

to a neighboring province, married, and eventually raised two children.

After five or six years she began to long for her family and village. When she mentioned this to Chau, he confessed that he also missed his family and friends. They decided to go back. He would apologize to her father and explain what happened. They returned to the village, and while she stayed on the boat, he went ahead to meet her father. When Chau met him and apologized, explaining what had happened, the father was extremely surprised. He said, "But Ch'ien is inside. She has been asleep ever since you left. She is in her room; we haven't been able to stir her."

It was now Chau's turn to be completely surprised. "But she is on the boat," he said. "Come, I'll show you." So they went together, and as they approached, Ch'ien stepped off the boat to meet them. At the same moment, the one who was asleep arose from her bed, went toward the approaching young woman, and the two merged into one.

That's the story.

It asks, "Which is the true Ch'ien?" In one version, Ch'ien herself is quoted as saying, "I myself don't know which is the true one, the one who stayed behind or the one who went off with Chau and got married."

I understand this story to express the sense some of us have of being deeply split, as if at some juncture of our lives we weren't able to completely integrate the conditions of our life and we became divided. Reflecting on the story, I asked myself where or what was the turning point? What turned separation into unification?

At some point she remembered her past, her parents, and

her village. This feels similar to what sometimes happens in our early lives when we have a profound experience of wholeness. Sometimes this recollection arises during zazen. In practice, as awareness deepens and subtle thought patterns release, layers of self-protectiveness drop, and we come to see the mental conditions that we're deeply embedded in. It often takes a long time to see them. When we do, we experience a release of conflicted aspects, a sense of deep integration.

Conflicts like those presented in this story arise when our alternatives are experienced as equally powerful and meaningful, where both have a deep hold on us. We might live out one side, if we can, waiting patiently for our circumstances to mature, to reveal our deeper direction. Or we hold both alternatives, until the holding and the waiting and the sitting and the questioning resolve of themselves, and the opposites become one.

This often is how we work with the koans of our lives. Apparent opposites become reconciled when we finally understand they are only opposites in the mind, that it is the mind that holds them in opposition. When Ch'ien remembered wholeness, she longed to return. When we remember our unified being, we long to return to our heart's ease, to our stomach's ease.

The story asks, "The woman and her spirit are separated. Which is the true one?" Robert Aitken asks: "Ch'ien living with her husband and children, Ch'ien pining at home—aren't these the same Ch'ien? All your actions—cleaning the bathtub, crossing the street, paying bills—are movements in separate circumstances of the same essential you. Can the true one be two?"

THE TRUTH OF THIS LIFE

We do have the sense sometimes of living parallel lives or thinking we should. We're living this life but should be doing that one. Being divided is debilitating. We can't talk ourselves out of those parallel lives. We have to live them out in some way until in the living the separation is healed, either through our understanding or by our realizing one life has already been completed. How do we come back to oneness, to our undivided self, with our different voices, yearnings, and feelings woven into one cloth?

It's not uncommon at the monastery that at the moment you are sitting facing the wall you see something you didn't even realize you were suppressing. Having realized one choice, another possibility arises powerfully in the mind. This is not a bad thing or a good thing. It is life. It is what happens in our lives and how we experience the complexity of being a human being, having a human body and mind. This is the stuff we work with, the competing drives, interests, purposes, and goals inside, to see which wither away as we practice and which become clearer. When we become clear, we don't have to make a choice. The choice is already made.