
GYOKUUN:
Genetically Modified

*So, what's all the fuss about?
Sitting and retreating,
Saying no, saying yes,
Birth and death
Nothing but deluded bookends.
The smoke of sandalwood disappears,
Leaving a pungent smell.*

KOAN

Gyokuun asked: "How many genes does it take to make a Buddha?"
Someone replied: "One more, one less."

REFLECTION

During his enlightenment experience, the Buddha said that he and the entire world are enlightened. Doesn't that include us? We're all Buddhas, all awakened beings, only we don't know it. Why?

Maybe because we've been genetically modified. Our individual strands of DNA and our different histories and cultures not only make us different from Shakyamuni Buddha and the great Zen masters of China and Japan, but also from Zen masters in the West, and also from each other.

Nevertheless, we're all enlightened as we are.

We have a beautiful, wooden, many-armed Kwan Yin, the Bodhisattva of Compassion, on an altar in our living room. Over many years and numerous moves, she's lost some of the arms she depends on to take care of the world. In addition, her torso has broken into three separate pieces that have been glued together several times. Is she any less a Buddha for all that?

Or how about my own Buddha, standing on the altar in my office, having lost one of his feet so that he seems to be balancing on one leg? Or my husband after his stroke? Or the homeless woman talking to herself on the pavement outside? Or the bully sending hate messages on Facebook? How about the killer serving time on death row for murdering a child?

The Zen Peacemakers have done annual retreats at Auschwitz-Birkenau for close to twenty years. Always we have chanted the names of those who died there. One year someone proposed also chanting the names of Nazi perpetrators, and we had a near riot.

How many genes does it take to make a Buddha? What does it take to misplace your Buddha nature—the loss of a hand, a foot, a mind? The loss of kindness, caring, a heart? Can you ever really lose your Buddha nature?

We're genetically modified, different from each other, and whole and complete as we are. The Buddha knew it; we don't, so we scramble this way and that, trying to find our way, trying to find ourselves.

In his poem "The Sycamore,"⁶⁶ Wendell Berry writes of the tree:

"Fences have been tied to it, nails driven into it,
hacks and whittles cut in it, the lightning has burned it.
There is no year it has flourished in
That has not harmed it."

And then he adds:

"... It has risen to a strange perfection
in the warp and bending of its long growth."

Don't we all warp and bend even as we try to be better husbands, wives, parents, and children? Reaching out towards others, we stretch so hard that at times we can't recognize our own contours and proportions.

Where do we feel most settled? At home. Where is that? "Home is within you, or home is nowhere at all," wrote Herman Hesse. We can carry home with us wherever we go because it's not a particular place, a special room, or a corner by a fireplace. We're whole as we are, enlightened as we are.

How do we experience this? By living it. Not only am I enlightened as I am, so is this cup of coffee, so is my child running upstairs to tell me about her day in school, so is my mother calling me on the telephone from far away. Buddha Nature manifesting as all beings, sentient and insentient.

Recognizing this, how am I living my life?

MANY GATES OF PRACTICE

Do you experience edges in your life, personal qualities and situations you're not comfortable with? Which of these disqualifies you from being a Buddha?