

66. Miaozong's Disappointment

CHINA, TWELFTH CENTURY

MASTER JIANYAN YUAN said, "As a well-brought up lady from a wealthy family, how can you be prepared for the business of a 'great hero'?"

Miaozong replied, "Does the Buddhadharmā distinguish between male and female forms?"

Yuan questioned her further. He said, "What is the Buddha? This mind is the Buddha. What about you?"

Miaozong replied, "I've heard of you for a long time. I'm disappointed to find that you still say that kind of thing."

URSULA JARAND'S REFLECTION

Many Zen dialogues start with the master questioning the disciple's capability for enlightenment. For example when Huineng, who later became the Sixth Patriarch of Zen, first met the Fifth Patriarch, the Patriarch called him an illiterate barbarian. This koan also begins with Master Yuan's challenge to Miaozong: how can you, a wealthy woman, become "a great hero"?

By now most of us believe that the possibility of enlightenment is not dependent on gender or class or other social distinctions. But despite this understanding, we may still imagine that the "business of a great hero" is extraordinary and unattainable, beyond our own individual ability or talent. We have a tendency to judge ourselves as lacking.

We perceive everything that is happening as happening to "me"—

"my" frustration, "my" sadness, "my" success—and we feel that none of it is enough. The Dharma is completely free to manifest in any form, any color, any taste, any thing, and yet by calling it "me" and "mine" we alienate ourselves from this inherent freedom and get stuck in separation and lack of confidence.

So if the Buddhadharma does not distinguish between forms, could it be that everything is already complete? Could it be that everything arises in openness and does not belong to "me"? Could it be that there is not even a "me" it could belong to? Could it be that I am not limited and lacking but am actually this alive openness itself?

These are questions that matter to us today, and they were also important to students of the Dharma in the past. When Yuan tells Miaozhong, "This mind is the Buddha," he is referring to a quote from one of the Chinese Pure Land sutras that gained fame in Zen circles through Master Mazu. It is said that one day Damei, a disciple of Mazu, came up to Mazu and asked, "What is Buddha?" Mazu answered, "This mind is Buddha." The mind asking the question is already Buddha.

Sometimes koans are described as medicine, but they are medicine for the *belief* that we are ill, though in fact there is no illness whatsoever. We could also call a koan a time bomb. It blows up and destroys the illusion of "me" as an independent self, separate from everything else. In this sense it is a cure for an illness that wasn't there in the first place. And once that which seemed to be so real but never existed drops away, there is no reason to carry the bomb around anymore. In fact if somebody is carrying it around and showing it off, it is quite clear that the explosion has not happened.

So if we read the koan assuming that Master Yuan is still feeling the need for a medicine called "this mind is the Buddha," then Miaozong's disappointment makes sense. As my teacher Soko Morinaga Roshi used to say: "If you use a piece of soap—after lathering up you wash away the soap with the dirt."

It's also possible to read this koan in a slightly different way. Yuan could be offering the saying "this mind is the Buddha" as one more bait

for Miaozong. And in this case Miaozong's response would be more along the lines of "Nice try, but no thank you!" and her so-called disappointment would be an acknowledgment of Yuan's sleight of hand.

It doesn't matter which version we prefer. What is pointed out is basically the same: everything, as it is, is already the manifestation of the Buddhadharma. You, as you are reading this, are already it. Whether there is understanding or no understanding, happiness or sadness, male or female, success or failure—it is all the alive, free, and perfect form of Buddha. There is nothing lacking that needs to be filled and nothing that needs to be changed.

After I went to Japan and started practicing with Morinaga Roshi, it became clear that there was a gap between what he was saying and what I was hearing. One thing he repeated again and again was *sono mama*, which could be translated as "as it is" or "this is it." And inevitably my inner response was, "That might be so, but I am not there yet. I don't feel enlightened." It took many years until the message wasn't heard by the "I" but hit home and was simply "as it is." Please consider this while reading the koan.



What authorities, inside or outside your own heart,
tell you that you are not capable of being a great hero?
What authorities tell you "Yes, you can"?