

## 77. Lingzhao's Shining Grasses

CHINA, EIGHTH CENTURY .....

**L**AYMAN PANG was sitting in his thatched cottage one day, studying the sutras. "Difficult, difficult, difficult," he suddenly exclaimed, "like trying to store ten bushels of sesame seed in the top of a tree."

"Easy, easy, easy," his wife, Laywoman Pang, answered. "It's like touching your feet to the floor when you get out of bed."

"Neither difficult nor easy," said their daughter Lingzhao. "It's like the teachings of the ancestors shining on the hundred grass tips."

### JISHO WARNER'S REFLECTION

The members of the Pang family are the most famously enlightened lay practitioners in all of Chan. Layman Pang studied with Shitou and Mazu, the great masters of his time. A few stories present the wisdom of others in the family, especially Lingzhao, whose comments always go to the heart of the matter.

The family is cozily gathered at home. The Layman suddenly cries out. At this very moment, he is piercingly aware of life's tangles. He's been studying the sutras, a favorite occupation, but his cry is not about the subtlety of the sutras, it's about the difficulty of living. Life in a body is endlessly complex, seething with thorns and tangles, erupting with love and tenderness. Studying the sutras won't save you, zazen won't save you, being as enlightened as Layman Pang won't save you from difficulty.

The Layman explains what he means: "It's like trying to store ten

bushels of sesame seed in the top of a tree." How frustrating to push heavy bushels up a tree, and all that sesame seed is just going to spill out and slither down the branches when the wind blows. It takes such effort to hold things in unstable combinations.

One day during a retreat I moaned to myself, "It's so hard," and I realized for the first time that I was simply describing my limited view. Of course that's how I feel when I'm boxed in by my delusions. "Difficult" is sometimes the feeling of the world pressing harshly on us, and sometimes the feeling of suffering arising in our hearts. "Difficult" is not inherent in the Dharma world, yet it is embedded in how we perceive and live. The world of myriad soft bodies coming and going is passionately beautiful, an endless marvel. And it's a world of stumbling and groping, dying as well as growing.

And here is Laywoman Pang, at her ease. What could be more straightforward than your feet reaching the floor when you stand up? Laywoman Pang speaks to us from the grounded viewpoint of unity, where no thing is divided from the rest of reality, where her body is not separate from the ground. When each thing is allowed to be as it is, and effort does not twist and force things out of shape, all is relaxed and open. Sometimes life unfurls softly for me, everything fitting like a box and its lid. If I try to hold on to that state, I find myself suddenly back in confusion, having lingered while life has moved on. And then I take my place in the flow again, in the endless moving stream that I never really leave.

It is crucial to know our undivided nature. It is a true side of life, the side where things are related to in terms of their sameness. The differences among people, trees, and stones are not accounted for here. So often, in the press of our hectic phenomenal life, Laywoman Pang's "easy, easy" looks like the goal, but despite our yearnings for life to be smooth, awakening is not an exit ramp from difficulty.

When Lingzhao says it's not the one or the other, she's not denying anything. The daughter is by birthright a synthesis of her father and mother. Reality is neither difficult nor easy: those are both opinions. Of course there is difficulty—that's our experience of feeling

thwarted, but it's not what life is in itself. We forget this to our peril whenever we fall into the view that reality is only how it looks to us now. It is also not the case that life should be easy. Living beings encounter great hardship as well as great joy; we fulfill our humanity through both streams.

So how is it? "It's like the teachings of the ancestors shining on the hundred grass tips." Lingzhao offers us the living Dharma. She wove baskets to support her family, and here she weaves for us a basket of all the myriad phenomena, often spoken of in Zen as "the hundred grasses." In this interwoven universe, the many contain the one, at the same time that one contains all. "The teachings of the ancestors" are the wisdom of the Buddhadharmas, which naturally shines forth from the tips of every swaying blade of grass. How could it be otherwise, when the myriad beings are themselves the one Dharma universe manifesting itself.

Wind-whipped seas and cerulean skies—  
 matching halves unite in a flash  
 in Lingzhao's grassy basket.



Is there a benefit to studying a spiritual text without understanding it?

Right now, for you, is the Dharma difficult, easy,  
 or something else entirely?