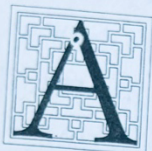


27. Zhaozhou's Deeply Secret Mind

CHINA, NINTH CENTURY



A NUN ASKED Master Zhaozhou Congshen, "What is the deeply secret mind?"

Zhaozhou squeezed her hand.

The nun said, "Do you still have this?"

Zhaozhou said, "You are the one who has this."

IKUSHIN DANA VELDEN'S REFLECTION

Koans often delight me. They play with my heart and mind like a schoolyard full of boisterous children. There are so many intrigues and distractions, so many games to join in on and tangents to follow. This koan is no exception. It runs up, full of energy and mischief and playfully tosses a ball in my direction: "What is the deeply secret mind?"

The word "secret" snags at something inside of me and I fumble. The ball bounces out into a busy street and I follow after it. What is a secret? Perhaps the nun meant "hidden"? Is that a better way to understand this? I duck and dodge and flail about, looking for safety and some way out. Thinking about secrets has led me to a dangerous place, as secrets often do, and I freeze.

Zhaozhou squeezes my hand.

I turn to another translation, one that gives the question as, "What is the innermost mind?" The question finds a shape inside of me and fills it completely. I sit with it for a while and settle down some.

There's less pursuit and more exploration; less trying to know and more experiencing. Time passes. I grow quiet and still, like an open field on a snowy night. More time passes.

And again, Zhaozhou's squeeze.

In Zen, and indeed in much of life, a gesture can speak more powerfully, and perhaps more truthfully, than words. So I turn away from the question and toward the gesture. I think of all the times someone has squeezed my hand. I remember walking with my father as a small child in the woods out in front of our house, his large hand completely engulfing mine. And the final squeeze on his deathbed, just minutes before he died, when there were no longer any words. And the squeezes from other people that have said, "Pay attention!" or, "Hello!" Hands offered in sympathy, in guidance, in warning, in comfort, in anger, in emphasis, in fear, in love, in friendship.

I think about connection and acknowledgment. How a squeeze is a reminder, of sorts, a message that cannot be said or heard but can be known and trusted. Maybe this is the path on which the innermost mind, the deeply secret understanding, travels.

And once again, Zhaozhou squeezes my hand.

In the end I have no answer to this koan, at least not in words. The nun and Zhaozhou continue on. I feel their ease and intimacy, and how together they create an understanding that is deeper than if they were separate. The river that flows through everything is understood to flow through everything. And so it does, back and forth; boundless waters, endless sky. Dragon play.

So these aren't secrets, but perhaps they are mysteries, to be discovered over and over again. Innermost, but not hidden, they flow from warm hand to warm hand. The plain and courageous intimacy of one human life intersecting with another, beyond words, beyond comprehension, and yet fully and completely received.

Wherever you are, you are one with the clouds and one with the sun and the stars that you see. You are still one

with everything. This is more true than I can say, and more true than you can hear.

—Shunryu Suzuki



When you hold a precious secret that can't be spoken,
how can you share it?