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CHRISTINA:  
*How Pathetic I Am!*

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*Shadow, shadow on the wall,  
Who is the most pathetic of all?*

**KOAN**

When Christina joined a group of longtime meditators, she asked, "Why don't we share our practice by taking turns giving short Dharma talks?"

The group members became upset. "We can give instruction about posture and breathing," they said, "but we need to have a proper teacher, at least a monk, to give a Dharma talk. We householders cannot do that under any circumstances."

Christina felt a chill in her heart. She thought, am I also afraid of owning my practice in this way? If so, how pathetic I am!

## REFLECTION

Only you can live in your own skin and stand on your own feet. Whose guidance do you need to confirm this fact? When the group members became upset at Christina's suggestion, she saw that hidden behind the façade of a healthy respect for tradition, there was a subtle fear that mirrored something very deep in herself. One of Christina's struggles was her difficulty, even strong resistance to, owning that she, just as she is, is a complete and perfect expression of the life force. She felt that the good little girl who was always seeking for someone's approval and sanctioning was alive in her despite her age and decades of Buddhist practice. Realizing this, she declared to herself: *How pathetic that I am like this! How pathetic that after all these years of practice, I am still unwilling to completely own who I am!*

Is this true of you, too? How pathetic are you?

The great challenge of spiritual life is that no one can realize for you who you truly are. As the Zen Master Kodo Sasaki said, "You can't trade even a single fart with the next guy. Each and every one of us has to live out his own life."<sup>55</sup> Who you are is not dependent on whether someone approves or disapproves, affirms or denies, gives or takes away anything from you. No one can live your life for you—you must stand fully on your own ground. You cannot live someone else's life—to try to do so is to negate the truth of that person. You are unique, a complete manifestation of the universal life force; the other person is so, too.

It is not uncommon for people to feel that someone wearing a robe or using a title is somehow superior, knows more, or is more important than they are. A worthy teacher will flip all your

assumptions and throw them back at you for examination. You will probably not like this much because your sense of inadequacy and unworthiness may be triggered. Or you may simply be perplexed, as when Zen Master Huangbo called his students *gobblers of dregs* and demanded, "Don't you know that there are no Zen teachers in all of China?" "And what about you?" a student asked. Huangbo prodded, "I don't say there is no Zen, only that there are no teachers."<sup>56</sup> This does not mean that companions of the Way are not a treasure, or that a teacher is not a treasure.

Unwittingly, Christina had challenged the group. Zen talks are meant to shake you out of your sense of yourself, not make you feel good about yourself. Sometimes a simple question can rattle foundations. Christina's suggestion had that impact, exposing a group taboo. Groups have shadows just as individuals do, with certain subjects that are never discussed or examined in order not to upset the status quo. It takes strong intentionality and commitment for a person or group to identify and examine these taboos.

You can easily overlook how group members can act as guides and teachers, including yourself. Playing such a role demands taking full responsibility for your own practice and for the group's practice. It means dropping judgments about each other, revealing aspects of yourself, and respecting the interdependence and wisdom that are inherent in each person. The Dharma can be taught in an empowering way when group members hold practice circles and discussions, witnessing each other's journey.

Can a group of spiritual practitioners challenge themselves to awaken together? Can you be a true spiritual friend in this way? Without a teacher, how do you know when you're starting to go off the rails? How do you know when you're just stagnating?

THE BOOK OF HOUSEHOLDER KOANS

as a group of practitioners? Awakening together invites all members of the group to question everything in each other's company, including the foundations of the group itself.

When you can throw out your assumptions and begin anew each moment with respect and equanimity, you will not be pathetic.

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*When do you stop needing external approval and trust that you are the complete manifestation of Life itself? Can you confidently exchange practice and support with your fellow practitioners? What changes do you and your group need to make to facilitate this?*