

12. Qiyuan Gives Birth

CHINA, SEVENTEENTH CENTURY

MASTER SHICHE asked his student, the nun Qiyuan Xinggang, "Buddha nature is not illusory. What was it like when you were nourishing the spiritual embryo?"

Qiyuan replied, "It felt congealed, deep, and solitary."

Shiche said, "When you gave birth to the embryo, what was it like?"

Qiyuan replied, "It was like being completely stripped bare."

Shiche said, "When you met with the Buddha, what was it like?"

Qiyuan said, "I took advantage of the opportunity to meet him face-to-face."

Shiche said, "Good! Good! You will be a model for those in the future."

SUNYA KJOLHEDE'S REFLECTION

When I first read this interchange between Shiche and Qiyuan, with that potent phrase, "nourishing the spiritual embryo," some long-ago experiences immediately leapt to mind. In my very first sesshin, when I was nineteen, I suddenly felt as if I were wrapped up in a mysterious birthing process. I had just started working with the koan "Mu" (Case 1 of the *Gateless Gate*), and somehow Mu—the whole universe, in fact—seemed to have all funneled into my own belly and to be swirling around in there. In a very physical way I sensed that something was trying to be born through me. At the time I hadn't a clue as to what was happening. It was an intense and confusing experience, particularly for someone so immature and so devoid of maternal instincts.

Maybe because it all seemed so odd, I never mentioned it to my teacher, Philip Kapleau, in our quick *dokusans* (private Dharma interviews). There was nothing like this in the tantalizing enlightenment stories I had read. Even if I could express what I was feeling, it never occurred to me that any man would relate to it. And yet, looking back, I believe Roshi would have understood. What a perfect metaphor for Zen practice: giving birth to the Unborn, to our own selfless Self!

“Nourishing the spiritual embryo,” a phrase adopted from Taoist teachings, has long been used in Zen to refer to deepening and maturing practice. However others may have used it, for many women an image like this can be a lot more accessible than the traditional advice to “bore through Mu like an iron drill,” or the purported words of the Buddha, “It’s like a strong man pushing down on a weaker one.”

I remember the turning point, in another seven-day sesshin, when it hit me that none of these very male images was working for me—when I finally had the confidence to toss it all aside and find my own way. Working with Mu, I realized, was like surrendering to and merging with a lover! Letting Mu walk, letting Mu eat, letting Mu do it all . . . suddenly practice opened up, shifting into something alive and juicy and intensely close.

And then Qiyuan’s response to her teacher’s question: “It felt congealed, deep, and solitary.” Anyone who has, even for a moment, found herself in the dark radiant depths of meditation will recognize at once what this nun is getting at with these few potent words. “Congealed, deep, and solitary” beautifully hints at this state where the mind finds itself pulled in to the very heart of the universe—like some celestial body leaving its familiar orbit and entering the gravitational field of a huge planet. Only the breathing, only Mu. All sense of “myself” and the world “out there” burns up in contact with this powerful force field.

Through sincere practice we become more and more simple, plain, empty. Like a great broom, practice itself sweeps right through our ego-tainted motivations, cleansing our hearts and minds. I went to every sesshin I could get to that first year. Then, early on the last

morning of a weeklong sesshin, after working on Mu through the night, I found myself in dokusan, feeling “completely stripped bare.” Stunned, I remember asking my teacher, “Can it really be so *plain*?” I meant plain as in “obvious,” but even more, I meant it as in “nothing special.” Only then did I realize how strongly I had expected and longed for something glorious, something to crow about, a badge of excellence!

That afternoon, at the sound of the last bell signaling the end of the final dokusan of sesshin, Mu broke wide open. Nothing was ever quite the same again. As I experienced later when giving birth to my children, you have to simply get out of the way and let the great mystery roll right through. In a sense we’re all pregnant with this wondrous buddha nature. And yet, paradoxically, until we’ve allowed it to fully come through us, it remains only an embryo, only a potential.

And once we have even just a glimpse of this true one, our whole life becomes an opportunity to “meet him face-to-face.” Moving through the checkout line at the co-op, hiking with children in the woods, greeting the rising sun, steaming vegetables, sitting in zazen . . . will we take advantage of these opportunities or not? Everything depends on how we answer this question—not with words and explanations, but with our whole being, moment by moment.



Is our buddha nature, which teachers say is always with us, like a little person inside our bodies? Do we need to take care of it, and does it matter to our buddha nature who we are or what we do?