
SHISHIN:
Golden Buddha

*When you meet the Buddha,
How will you greet him?
If you say a word, he can't hear you.
If you keep silent, he won't know you are here.
Tell me: What will you do?*

KOAN

One night, Shishin had a dream. He and his teacher were sitting in the meditation hall when a brilliant golden light shone suddenly from a corner of the room.

Shishin whispered to his teacher, "The Buddha is here."

His teacher smiled and said, "Yes! Let's go and greet the Buddha."

Shishin did not hesitate. He got up from his seat and walked over to the light, which was so bright that he couldn't look directly at it. Lowering his entire body to the floor, he bowed reverently. Prostrated, he felt the warm light wash all over him and a deep sense of peace welled up inside.

Later, his teacher asked, "What did the Buddha give you that was not already yours?"

REFLECTION

Shishin sat zazen for years, even hosting a sitting group and organizing retreats, all the while supporting his family and raising his children. Throughout it all, he experienced a profound dis-ease and felt inadequate as a Zen practitioner.

In particular, Shishin was frustrated with his lack of an experience of enlightenment. Having come of age at a time when enlightenment experiences were the gold standard of American Zen practice, he desired an experience so transformative that he would never feel unworthy or have a sense of dis-ease ever again.

Settling into the practice of sitting, Shishin realized that one persistent thought came up early each morning: *I am not good enough*. This life-denying mantra was the background music to his life, a tightly woven narrative against which he measured himself, an ever-present destructive and traumatizing voice. The more Shishin meditated, the more overwhelmed he felt by this voice. But tell me, did Shishin fundamentally lack anything to begin with?

Do you believe that transcendent experiences will eliminate these debilitating voices? In my own practice, awareness of *I am not enough* led me to a sad inner child that called out for my attention. I learned to ask her what was wrong and what was it that she needed. I allowed myself to experience her sadness and to give her what she needed. What is your inner child asking of you today? Listen carefully, experience the feelings, and tend to them. In this way, you can take care of the persistent voice within.

What beliefs do you harbor about yourself? Do these beliefs take the form of negative thoughts that are not spoken out loud but with which you are in constant conversation inside? And do you measure yourself against them without ever questioning their validity? Is your self-narrative true? How do you know?

In the midst of the rough and tumble of his daily life, Shishin clung to a regular sitting practice. Sitting was what he knew to do, and he did it. The Zen Master Kodo Sawaki said, "Zazen is good for nothing." Just sit. This is a strong prescription when the mind is overrun with debilitating thoughts of unworthiness; it is an even stronger medicine when there is no promise or sign of anything changing. What are your reasons for doing your spiritual practice? What do you want to happen? It's best to be honest with yourself about your expectations.

In his dream, Shishin whispered, "The Buddha is here." Where is *here*? In the meditation room? In the bathroom? On the street? Everywhere! There is nowhere that the Buddha's light does not permeate. The light from the Buddha was so bright that Shishin could not look at it, yet he did not hesitate when his teacher said, "Let's go say hello!" What a daring invitation! The Buddha is right here, now. How will you greet the Buddha?

Who is Buddha? Can you tap your very own body and say, "This?" Over time we realize that Buddha is nothing but our own body. Conditioned as we are to seek outside of ourselves, we are perplexed: How can I possibly be Buddha?

When he prostrated reverently on the floor, Shishin felt the warm bright light and profound sense of peace wash over himself from the bottom of his feet to the top of his head. When prostrating, we lower our self-centeredness to the ground and lift the Buddha's heart-mind above our heads. Many years ago, in my

own practice, I bowed alone all night long while chanting softly with each bow, "Being one with Great Compassion Avalokitesvara Bodhisattva." Suddenly, the Bodhisattva herself appeared before me. The next morning, my teacher, sensing that something was different, asked, "What happened to you?" When I told him, he said, "I told you: When you call the bodhisattvas, they will come!"

Through all the years of meditation, Shishin, by taking the posture of Shakyamuni Buddha in the midst of his own dis-ease, had been calling to the Buddha. One night, the gap between Shishin and the Buddha closed. When Shishin awoke from his dream, he rose from his bed and sat in a cross-legged meditation posture. His whole being was suffused with the extraordinary vivid peace of the Buddha.

Later, his teacher asked him, "What did the Buddha give you that was not already yours?"

Bring the Buddha to me right now!

Identify a belief about yourself. Investigate it! What beliefs do you harbor about your spiritual practice? Investigate them! What is your inner child asking of you? Provide it! What is Buddha doing right now?