

A monk asked Nan Ch'uan: Is there a teaching no master ever preached before?

Nan Ch'uan said: Yes, there is.

What is it? asked the monk.

Nan Ch'uan replied: It is not mind, it is not Buddha, it is not any thing.

[Mumonkan Case 27]

Jishou Daojen the Unknown

The practice of reciting the names of Dharma ancestors not only aligns us with their clear eye but expresses gratitude (I would even say amazement) that somehow we've had the extraordinary good fortune to come under their influence, so that we have this chance to discover experiencing in a wholly unexpected way.

Our sesshin dedication now includes many names in Chinese including names I hadn't heard of before. Wanting to become familiar with them and hoping to post a summary on the website for anyone else curious to know more, I hunted around and found references to most of the names, and some stories about them. But for weeks and weeks the project foundered at the name "Jishou Daojen." Jack was travelling and I couldn't ask him directly where it came from. I could find no mention of this name anywhere. I couldn't even say if it was male or female, historical human or mythical figure. There are mythical figures in our ancestor list: the Ancient Seven Buddhas, for a start.

If I can't find any information about some of those on our ancestor list, did they ever exist, or not? If a name dangles out there and is repeated but there is no record of history or deeds, no mention even of gender (though I suppose a Chinese

speaker might guess from the name itself), what is it but a name, a word, some sounds? Even to do a genealogical search I'd have to learn written and spoken Chinese. I was stumped to the point of asking, "Well, what does it mean to be a person then?" For that matter, what does "person" even mean? If you live and die without a trace, what then? Were you a "person" anyway? (...and what do I mean by "you" here?)

So I went to the dictionary and looked up "person." The first definition was "A living human being" and the second was "The composite of characteristics that make up an individual personality." Personality in turn was defined first as "the state or quality of being a person." Circular, these definitions – not so helpful. How about the derivation of the word, then? It happens that "person" derives ultimately from the Etruscan word, *phersu*, meaning "mask," of the sort worn by actors at the time. There is also a related but false etymology for "person" meaning "to sound through" from the Latin *per-sonare*, which makes a certain sense since actors would project their voices through the mask, and the person would be presented by sounding through... but evidence does not support this as a source for the word "person."

The actor's mask is designed both to conceal and to reveal identity. One definition of "identity" is, "The personality of an individual regarded as a persisting entity." It's a commonplace in our culture to regard persons as "identifiable persisting entities," an entity being "a thing with distinct and independent existence." But Zen students recognize the interdependence and transitoriness of all phenomena. What's difficult and counter-intuitive for us is to see that no exception is made for human beings. Human beings too are radically interdependent and transitory, and have no persisting independent existence . . . though we may act in characteristic ways for a time.

The question becomes – What does it mean to "be a person" if we are *not* identifiable independent, persisting entities? Maybe personhood actually *is* like a mask – both concealing and revealing. But if I say concealing and revealing "what we are," that's misleading. Our minds automatically make "what we are" into a concrete thing, into "a persisting entity."

We know from long experience that no characterization of a person can capture its full reality. Descriptions highlight certain aspects and hide or ignore others – it's the nature of words. Think of a difficult person you know. Maybe you've been hurt by their continual criticism and lack of approval over many years. What do you do with the one time when you hear him yelling as he chases "that blankety-blank *mouse* who stole my granola bar and *ate* it . . ." and then, when he finds the mouse, hear him say, "Ohhh . . . he's *cute*!" What do you do with that?

Or when we hear a gentle, generous-hearted person totally lose it and start screaming at a hapless office manager? What do you do with that?

We tend to ignore actual events and shape our ideas of people including ourselves in a sort of shortcut way. I'll wager there is more than one of us right now noticing the thought, "Yes, I do overgeneralize, and I shouldn't do that – need to be more careful." The judgment "bad person" lurks in the background and the mood is dark. But this stream of thoughts is a built-in, automatic survival device, nothing more. Generalize, observe discrepancy, correct it; generalize, observe discrepancy, correct ... This also describes the working of a mechanical governor in a car engine! There's no "I" doing it, no "I" is necessary. This is an automatic device – watch it at work!

Lifetimes of careful observation and radical honesty have gone into the Zen view that, as Suzuki Roshi put it, "There are, strictly speaking, no enlightened people,

there is only enlightened activity." Or put another way, "the person does not perform action; rather, action performs the person." (Kasulis, *Zen Action, Zen Person*, p. 139) This view comes from direct experience, as expressed in encouraging words we've often heard such as "the cherry tree stands and walks"; and "robin song sits on your cushion." Experience happens all by itself. There is no consciously-willed direction from a self, standing outside of experience. (*ibid.*)

If we attend closely to actions, noticing in detail what is happening right now and how we know – for example, just this sensation, and that one, and these – you might notice a sense of movement or continual change in a certain mode. Or, as Kasulis says, "As each context arises . . . the Zen person *is* the response to what is, as it is. The act is an expression in a context; it is the meaning of the Zen person for that time, place, and situation." (p. 153) Being responsive to this exact situation as it is right now is Zen practice, whether contemplating Chao-Chou's dog, saddling a horse, pulling weeds, tending wounds, typing, or telling jokes.

The problem arises with the apparent unity or continuity that we infer from experience and then make into "a self."

The Zen person changes meaning as the situation shifts. This is why liberated human behavior is likened to clouds or water – continually changing shape to fit surrounding circumstances. (cf. Kasulis, p. 153) Continually changing shape, there is no enduring entity, no person or self to defend or to be ashamed of, no me needing to improve. Only, the response to *this* moment has to be completely appropriate. And then the response to *this* moment, completely appropriate, with nothing left over, nothing persisting, nothing other than *doing*, doing itself. There is no additional person, no entity acting, only action itself.

So now what does the absence of information about Jishou Daojen call for? What manner of event led to this person's relevance to us as Zen students?

When Jack finally returned from abroad, he pointed me toward Grace Schireson's book, *Zen Women: Beyond Tea Ladies, Iron Maidens, and Macho Masters*. This book includes the only mention of Jishou Daojen that I found in print, though the older sources she cites for the story are still available as well. This reference is embedded in the story of Miaodao's training with her teacher, Dahui. Here's what Schireson wrote:

Later Dahui described to Miaodao how another woman training with his teacher had broken through.

(From this point on, Schireson quotes Miriam Levering's chapter, "Miao-tao and Her Teacher Ta-hui," in *Buddhism in the Sung*, edited by Peter Gregory and Daniel Getz Jr.)

. . . . I told her that in Szechwan there was a [woman] Jishou Daojen who studied with the old monk [Yuanwu]. . . . He instructed her to look at "It is not mind, it is not Buddha, it is not a thing—what is it?" This went on for a number of years without an entrance. One day she told the old monk: "I have looked at this saying and have not yet an entrance. Do you have another expedient means?" The old monk said: "When I ask you, 'What is it?' make a comment." He then picked up the whisk and showed it to her, saying: "It is not mind, it is not Buddha, it is not a thing," leaving off the clause "what is it?" She suddenly understood. (Schireson, p. 126)

In the course of teaching a female student, Miaodao, Dahui cited his own teacher's interaction with an earlier woman student, Jishou Daojen, using the same koan. Clearly, this earlier woman was comfortable enough with her teacher, Yuanwu, to admit stuckness and to ask if he had another angle on the problem. This speaks

volumes about the nature of their relationship, developed through years of practice together. Still, to admit defeat and ask for help would take a lot of courage, especially in those days – courage purchased with long frustration brought to the point of desperation. And that is it, the sum total of what I could find out about Jishou Daojen. What's amazing is that this story is still alive here and now: The old monk Yuanwu pointed to Jishou Daojen and asked us, "It is not mind; it is not Buddha; it is not a thing – what is it?" Where Yuanwu picked up a fly whisk, I picked up the common and elusive notion of "person."

Maybe, given the context of the assumed inferiority of women, Jishou's story is helpful in much the same way that we find Huineng the Sixth Patriarch's story encouraging. He was said to be illiterate. If literacy isn't required for seeing into self-nature, and if being male is no advantage, what in the world is meant by this practice of Zen and the elusive carrot called seeing into self-nature? Seems it is not to be had by striving or excellence or virtue or even doing our best to "be good." Bewildering, on the one hand, and encouraging on the other, since most of us are more familiar with our shortcomings than with our deepest impeccable nature. We have after all spent a lot of effort trying to improve on every front, with more or less success. Yet we hear rumors of an endeavor where status, virtue, and improvement may be irrelevant? Could it be?

In the little book called *The Ceasing of Notions*, a very old Zen text from the Dunhuang Caves, the student asks, "Is it possible to be at one with the Way without having eradicated the delusions?" and his teacher answers: "As long as one thinks of being at one with and not being at one with, one is not free of delusions."

Further, the student asks, "What should one do then?" and his teacher responds, "Not doing anything—that's it!" [p.24] This doesn't mean sitting motionless until

your hair grows down to the ground. Rather, it means acting completely and appropriately in the moment in such a way that there is never *another*, never an *other*. Seeing and enacting the world as not-two; letting action act without creating an actor – *is* "not doing anything" because there is no actor. This betweenness or locus where the senses manifest is nowhere, (which can be written "now-here") – the nowhere now here where seeing is, before anything is seen and before the notion of seer; where hearing is, before sound or hearer, where touching is, before object or toucher—this primal, living creative betweenness is where the mask of "person" *reveals* true nature.

It is not Mind; it is not Buddha; it is not any thing . . .