

Chung Tai Koans

Extra-ordinary in the Ordinary

In a meeting to plan for the setting up of a Zen center, a nun was sitting next to the Master and started to examine his face carefully. She thought, "Shifu's face is full of wrinkles, and he looks no different from any ordinary old man. So, why are these prestigious people so respectful of him?"

After the meeting, when all the lay disciples had left, the Master talked to the monks and nuns, "There is no conceptual thought in awareness; pure awareness is without attachment When Buddhists are very advanced in their practices, in outward appearance, they look like ordinary people, but their minds will be totally different. This is what we call 'Subduing your light to blend in with the ordinary.'"

Reality Check

A disciple said, "Shifu, I really, really want to change my assignment!" The Master replied, "In this world, nothing is real."

The Master's Smile

A monk joyously reported his meditation experience to the Master in his Office. The Master looked at him, smiled, and did not say anything. After a few days, this monk was annoyed by something, so he came again to complain to the Master about his difficulty. The Master still looked at him and smiled, but did not say a word.

The monk looked at the Master's familiar smile and was reminded of the distinctly different state of mind that he was in a few days ago. The smile seemed to remind him of the teaching, "To be calm in quietness is not true stability, to be calm in chaos is true stability."

Chung Tai's Milarepa*

One day, a lay disciple offered an expensive tree to the monastery. The Master instructed a certain monk, "Find a place to plant this tree." The very next morning, the Master said, "This place is not good; plant the tree over there." The monk followed the Master's instruction.

In the afternoon, the Master interrogated him, "Who asked you to plant it here? Plant it in that place over *there*." Sweating, the monk dug up the tree and planted it again.

That same evening, the Master again commanded him, "It is planted too far left; move it over a little to the right."

Thus, ever since this precious tree arrived, this monk was kept busy planting and replanting the tree. The lay disciple observed this and told the Master, "The tree costs a lot. If we keep moving it around, will it not die?"

The Master replied, "If it can help a disciple to mature and attain realization, however expensive the tree is, would it not be worth the price?"

(* Milarepa (1052-1135) is one of the most famous masters in Tibetan Buddhism history. In his youth he had been a black magician and killed many people, but having repented, he became a Buddhist under the strict guidance of Marpa The Translator (1012-1097). Milarepa is famous for having endured many unusually harsh trials under Marpa to cleanse himself of the transgressions and to reach enlightenment.)

The Cypress Tree

Once, in a discussion session on the *Shurangama Sutra* at the Chung Tai Buddhist Institute, a monk brought up a famous Chinese koan.

A monk asked Chan Master Zhaozhou, "What is the essence of the Dharma?" The Chan Master replied, "The cypress tree in front of the courtyard."

The disciple asked, "But Shifu, I don't understand, why is the essence of the Dharma the cypress tree in front of the courtyard?" All the disciples held their breaths in anticipation.

The Master firmly responded, "It indeed is the cypress tree in front of the courtyard."

The Best Laid Plans

Before becoming a member of the Sangha, a certain monk's nickname was 'Perfect Planner.' On the night he was ordained, he immediately planned a schedule for practice: everyday he would recite the *Diamond Sutra* seven times, chant the Great Compassion mantra 108 times, prostrate to the Buddha 108 times, etc.

After three days, the Master asked him, "How do you feel after becoming a monk?" He replied proudly, "I chant the Great Compassion mantra 108 times everyday," thinking that the Master would be proud of his diligence. But instead the Master replied, "Don't chant any mantras."

The monk thought, "If I do not chant any mantras, then it should be okay to recite sutras?" So he said to the Master, "I also recite the *Diamond Sutra* seven times and do prostrations 108 times everyday." The Master said, "Don't recite any sutras and don't do prostrations."

The monk was dumbfounded and finally asked, "Shifu, if a monk doesn't recite sutras, doesn't do prostrations, what should he do?" The Master answered, "Keep the present mind still and in suchness, and contemplate the reality of the Middle Way."

Don't Wait Until Next life

A monk who had encountered an obstacle in his practice became doubtful as to whether or not he could complete the Path in this lifetime. He therefore asked the Master, "Shifu, in my next life....."

Before he could finish his question, the Master immediately chided him, "Next life? In Zen practice, one extends this present mind to an eon, and an eon exists in this present mind. In this very lifetime, liberate yourself from the cycle of life and death!"

The Fundamental Duty of a Monk

A monk was injured accidentally in the preparation of a Dharma ceremony. The Master wanted him to take a rest and treat his injury, but the monk could not forget about the ceremony and stubbornly insisted on continuing his work. He asked, "Isn't helping sentient beings the fundamental duty of a monk?"

The Master replied, "Firmly abiding in right mindfulness is the most fundamental duty of a monk."

What It Means to Serve

Because of his low blood pressure, one of the monks was unable to join the morning and evening services, and this made him feel guilty. He came to the Master's office and asked what he should do. The Master replied, "That's not a problem."

Surprised, the monk interjected, "But it is the duty of a monk to attend the morning and evening services." The Master responded, "To work earnestly is to attend services; to work with a mind undisturbed is to attend services." Upon hearing this, the monk was greatly inspired.

Letting Go

At Chung Tai, the Master always teaches the disciples the primary importance of letting go of attachments. This is especially applicable in the architectural office, since architects and designers usually want to establish their own styles and approaches.

In every project, the monks in charge would create a variety of designs and ask for the Master's opinion. Invariably, the designers would put the designs they deem to be unsatisfactory at the bottom. Ironically, the Master almost always picked one of the less favored designs, which turned out to bring surprisingly wonderful results.

However, when the designers were no longer attached to their own views, the Master would say, “Good! This is a nice way to do it! Let’s follow this idea.”

Personal Merits and Group Achievement

When constructing the Ling Chuan Monastery, there were not enough funds to make the payroll, so it was difficult to hire workers. Early one morning, the monks gathered silently and decided to go out and solicit alms. When the Master found out about it, he said compassionately, “There is no need to do this. It will be okay.”

But late at night while everyone else was sleeping, there was one person working silently at the construction site. When one of the monks went out to check, he found that it was the Master.

On another day, a monk found that the Master was moving stones to a corner. He hurried over to help him and said, “Shifu, please just let us do that.” Without even lifting his head, the Master said, “You earn your merits, I’ll earn mine.”

When the workers were through and left for the day, the Master and all the disciples continued to work at night. On empty ground, they laid stones, built walls with bricks, and put tiles on the roofs. They worked diligently. One by one, the Chan Hall, Dining Hall, Lecture Hall, as well as other buildings all gradually stood tall from the ground.

Working out the Ego

In the early days of constructing the Ling Chuan Monastery, there was much hard work to be done. An elder disciple of the Master was seen tirelessly transporting 100-pound bags of cement; he and all the other monks were all working hard and sweating profusely.

Once, the Master suddenly turned to this elder disciple and started to reproach him, “How many times have I told you to prepare snacks for

people who are out here working? Why didn't you prepare any snacks?" The monk joined his palms and said respectfully, "Yes, Shifu."

On another occasion, when everyone went out to transport stones, a nun who was not strong enough to move a big stone accidentally dropped it into the mountain gorge, and it was rolling directly towards the Master. The Master jumped aside to avoid the stone and pointed his finger at this elder disciple, chiding him, "That's all your fault." The monk joined his palms, and said respectfully, "Yes, Shifu."

Whenever a monk said something inappropriate, the Master chided this elder disciple, "That's all your fault." When yet another monk made a mistake, the Master would scold this elder disciple, "It's again all your fault." This elder disciple of the Master would always join his palms and respond respectfully, "Yes, Shifu."

Strike the Wooden Plank on Time

Before becoming a monk, a certain disciple worried that he would not be able to wake up on time to attend the morning service at 4:30 am.

He appealed to the Master, "Shifu, if I can't get up, may I be excused from the morning service?" The Master replied, "Certainly."

After he became a monk, the chore assigned to him was to strike the wooden plank in the hallways at 3:45 am to wake everyone up for morning service.

The Dharma of Walking

There was a man who had practiced the Dharma for over ten years before he became a monk. For six consecutive years, he had organized national activities that involved making offerings to the monks; he was an important leader of the lay Buddhist community in the south of Taiwan. Once, somebody asked him, "Since you have practiced for so long, why didn't you become a monk sooner? Why is it that once you met the Master, you

immediately decided to be a monk?" The monk replied, "Just to learn how the Master walks will, in itself, take a whole lifetime."

Hard-to-Find Opportunities

One day, a taciturn and introverted monk appealed to the Master, "I am afraid to face the public. What should I do?" The Master responded, "Without sentient beings, it is impossible to practice compassion and become a Buddha. When facing anxieties brought about by others, we should view these challenges as hard-to-find opportunities that facilitate our practice."

Whoever Comes is the Guest

One day, the Master walked into the reception office and asked, "What kind of receptionist are you? You are not even aware that a guest has come in." The monk in charge was puzzled, "That's strange. Did someone sneak into the monastery?"

The Master said, "A chicken has gone into the Yun-Lai Hall. Don't you know that?" The monk grunted, "But he didn't come here to check-in."

Take Leave of Life and Death

A monk, who wished to visit his family, asked the Master for a leave of absence.

The Master said, "Sure, but can you ask for a leave from * King Yama?" Right then the monk had an awakening.

* King Yama rules the underworld and judges people upon death.

One's own Children

A monk felt he had encountered a setback, so he told the Master, "Sometimes, it is really difficult to teach the Dharma to sentient beings. Often, they are not only stubborn, but they also criticize the Dharma and insult the Sangha. That's really frustrating!"

The Master answered, "Buddhas and bodhisattvas treat sentient beings like their own children. When a child makes a mistake, parents only hope that the child will learn from it and correct it. How can parents be angry with their child?"

Foreman of the Foreman

One day, the Master directed a monk, "Have the foreman complete this project."

The monk responded, "Shifu, you have already instructed the foreman, haven't you?"

The Master replied, "You are the foreman of the foreman."

Dissolving Karmic Obstacles

During a meditation session at the Ling Chuan Monastery, the Master came to personally supervise the session. He applied the awakening staff to almost all of the disciples. One monk who was not hit by the staff wondered, "Why doesn't the Master hit me, it would help to dissolve my karmic obstacles."

At that very moment, the Master appeared beside the monk, bent forward slightly, looked directly at him, and remarked, "One should dissolve one's own obstacles."

* A short, flat wooden staff used to maintain alertness and to assist cultivation in the Chan hall.

Earthworm Puzzle

In the early days of Ling Chuan Monastery, the monks were working on its expansion. One day, while digging, they discovered that an earthworm was chopped in half, and each half was wriggling by itself.

The Master saw this and asked, “In which end resides the Buddha nature?”

All were silent.

Polishing Pebbles

Many years ago, as the Master was standing by the clear and rippling waters of the creek at Ling Chuan Monastery, he said to the monk who was standing beside him, “In the years to come, my disciples will all look very much like the perfectly round pebbles in this bubbling creek.”

In the ensuing years, many have come to be disciples of the Master. In the continuous flow of the Master’s Dharma teachings, the disciples polished off each other’s rough edges and have become well-rounded.

Tofu Lesson

One day at lunch, the disciples found that the meal consisted of all tofu dishes: steamed tofu, boiled tofu, fried tofu, and tofu soup. They questioned the dianzuo, “Why is there nothing but tofu on the table?” The dianzuo retorted, “Who was craving tofu recently?” Four or five disciples conceded that they had been thinking of tofu just the day before.

The dianzuo responded, “Shifu often cautions us that we should not let our thoughts wander carelessly in the monastery. All day long the kitchen has been receiving offerings of tofu!”

Now You Can Come Across

One day, the Master led a group of disciples to survey the construction of the new Chung Tai Chan Monastery and came upon a muddy section of the path. While everyone was worrying how to get through, the Master picked up two rocks and placed them in the middle of the path and gracefully stepped through the mud. He then said to the disciples, "Now you can come across."

Learning of Non-Learning

A frustrated monk asked the Master, "Shifu, it seems to take forever to learn everything necessary to help all beings. What can I do?" The Master responded, "When one understands the learning of non-learning, then one's learning is perfect and complete!" He continued, "Out of compassion, we never cease learning. To learn is to practice concentration and diligence; it is a blessing. Beyond learning, we also need to understand the principle of non-learning."

The True Meaning of Non-Regression

A monk who had been the abbot at a Zen center for many years had experienced many difficulties. He felt mentally and physically frustrated in teaching the Dharma and cultivating the path of the bodhisattva. He wondered how to achieve the "stage of non-regression" in spiritual practice.

One day, the Master came to the center for a meal. Although it was way past mealtime, and despite having been on the road for days and giving Dharma lectures one after another, he was calm and centered, displaying not the slightest trace of weariness.

Seeing this, the abbot inquired, "Shifu, the social climate for teaching the Dharma gets worse and worse. Why do you still build monasteries and Zen centers? Why does your mind not regress even for a single moment in its determination to help all sentient beings?"

The Master closed his eyes and answered firmly, “The worse the conditions get, the stronger your determination should be. That is true non-regression.” Upon hearing this, it was as if a flash of light had entered his mind—the monk’s frustrations suddenly disappeared.

Childcare

A nun had the heavy responsibility of instructing elementary and middle school age novice nuns, so she requested another assistant from the Master.

The Master asked, “Is it not true that secular schools normally have fifty students in one class?” The nun responded, “But that is different! They only need to take care of their students for 8 hours a day, but I have to be with them 24 hours a day.”

The Master said, “I have over one thousand ordained disciples. What should I do?” The nun silently joined her palms and resolved to accept her responsibility.

Trees in Chung Tai

A monk who had just entered the Buddhist Institute studied very hard, but still felt he needed direction.

One day, seeing the Master taking a walk, he hurried over to him, sincerely joined his palms, and asked, “Shifu, I do not understand the Dharma at all. What should I do?”

The Master responded, “Do you know how many trees there are in Chung Tai?”

What Illusory Thoughts?

A newly ordained monk often thought of his family. One night he missed his father and began to worry about him. The next morning, when he opened his door, the Master was standing there and admonished him, "Why such illusory thoughts!"

Bewildered, the new monk asked, "What illusory thoughts?" He then respectfully explained to the Master, "I was only thinking about my family." The Master immediately responded, "That is an illusory thought."

Suddenly the young monk understood the Zen saying: "The moment one raises a thought, one departs from the truth." All wandering thoughts are illusory. A Buddhist monk's duty is to practice diligently to attain the Way, and to do so is the best way to repay the kindness of his parents." Upon this realization, his illusory thoughts immediately ceased.

Never Too Old

A monk who served as abbot in a Zen Center complained, "Shifu, I am getting older, and I wish to rest. I don't want to be the abbot." The Master asked, "How old are you?" The monk replied, "Fifty years old."

The Master remarked, "I am already in my seventies!" He then added, "Age is irrelevant in cultivation; to liberate sentient beings is our fundamental duty. 'Live not for your own comfort, but to free sentient beings from suffering.'"

Sharing Bitterness

In the early days of Ling Chuan Monastery, there was a lay disciple who sincerely offered bitter-tea to the monastery. The monks and nuns at the monastery did not like to drink the bitter tea and always put it aside.

Observing this the Master said, "Since you do not like the bitterness, let me drink it for you."

* In Chinese the pronunciation of "*bitterness*" is the same as "*suffering*."

False or Real?

A monk who served at a Zen center often thought, "Since every worldly phenomenon is like a dream or mirage, there is no difference whether I work diligently or not."

One day, the Master came to the center. He saw an artificial flower which was covered with crystal-clear artificial water drops. Pointing to the flower, the Master asked this monk, "Are the water drops real or artificial?" The monk responded, "Artificial."

A minute later, the Master asked again, "Are the water drops real or not?" Puzzled, the monk emphasized, "Shifu. They are ar-ti-ficial." A little later, the Master asked again, "Are the water drops real or fake?" Astonished, the monk replied, "Shifu, the water drops are fake." The Master smiled and said, "Just like the real thing."

Afterwards, the monk pondered over this incident for a long time and suddenly came to a realization, "Although every worldly phenomenon is an illusion, to liberate sentient beings, a bodhisattva still carries out seemingly illusory activities with integrity."

Spilled Beans

One night, the disciples were sorting beans when someone accidentally tipped over the pan. As everyone focused on picking up the spilled beans, the Master suddenly turned off the light and asked, "Where is it?"

Pointing Fingers

A nun proudly told the Master, "I no longer behave immaturely toward unpleasant events, unlike that certain other nun!" The Master smiled but said nothing.

Shortly thereafter, the nun made a request to the Master but was denied. She stomped her foot and pouted, "Shifu, you are always like this!" The Master pointed to her feet and asked, "So, what is this behavior?"

A Monk's Calling

One day, a newly ordained monk saw the Master return to the monastery looking weary. Concerned, the novice monk inquired, "Shifu, are you tired?"

The Master calmly replied, "When the body is weary, simply take a rest; when the mind wanders, immediately bring it back. Practicing the Dharma is one's individual responsibility; helping sentient beings is our fundamental purpose."

Assuming Responsibility

Once, after a meeting in the Master's office, a monk stayed behind. The Master, who was there meditating, suddenly reproached the monk.

The monk thought to himself, "I did not make those mistakes. Why am I being reprimanded?" But then, becoming aware of his ego, he turned his thinking around to: "Shifu, I am willing to take responsibility!"

As soon as he had this thought, he saw the glimmer of a smile from the Master.

Hammer Dharma

A novice monk had been performing manual labor for quite some time. Not realizing the essence of Zen practice, he became weary of the work. When he encountered the Master, he knelt and asked respectfully, "Shifu, what is the Buddha Dharma?"

Picking up a hammer and a chisel, the Master struck the wall, saying, "This is Buddha Dharma."

Bouncing Ball

A monk was troubled with his wandering thoughts. Not knowing how to deal with them, he felt no peace and asked the Master what to do.

The Master said, "Thoughts come; thoughts go. Just ignore them. If you don't hit a ball, it won't bounce."

Not You

A monk holding an important executive position at the monastery faced many issues with personnel management and felt exasperated. He turned to the Master and expressed his frustration.

The Master replied, "Others can have worries, but not you!" Immediately, the monk's afflictions vanished.

Birthday Party

A lay disciple wanted to organize a birthday celebration for the Master and asked the Master for the date of his birth. The Master smiled but did not answer. The disciple was perplexed, so he asked again.

The Master said, "Where there is birth, there is death. Monks do not celebrate birthdays."

What Time is it Now?

In the early days of the construction of Ling Chuan Monastery, the Master often led his disciples in working meditation by laboring at the construction site until past midnight. One night, a monk inquired of the Master, "Shifu, it is already late; isn't it time to take a break?" The Master asked, "What time is it now?" "It is one hour before midnight," the monk replied. The Master turned to him and said, "Oh! It is now daytime in America."

The monk paused for a while and then continued to work with the Master until one o'clock in the morning. When they finished, he was not sleepy at all. Suddenly, he realized the truth of the Master's words, "To sleep is to be in delusion."

Too Tired

One day a monk asked, “Shifu, I am doing many chores at the same time. Is there one chore I can do without?” The Master asked, “Why?” The monk responded, “I am very tired.”

The Master remarked, “I am very tired, too.”

The monk was speechless.

Accepting All the Blame

At the Ling Chuan Monastery during a staff meeting, the Master harshly pointed out that the monks’ chanting was unacceptable. He called on the *dianzuo* (the monk in charge of the kitchen), “Tell me what the reason is: Is it because you didn’t cook enough food so that everyone had to chant with an empty stomach?” The *dianzuo* stood up with his palms together and said “Yes, Shifu.”

As the meeting continued, the Master learned that construction was behind schedule. He called on the *dianzuo* again, “Did you forget to prepare snacks for the monks who were working hard at the construction site? Is that why we are behind schedule?” The *dianzuo* replied respectfully, “Yes, Shifu.” Throughout the meeting the *dianzuo* repeatedly stood up in response to the Master’s severe questioning, each time calmly answering only with “Yes, Shifu.”

Sitting through the Night

A very dedicated and diligent nun wished to practice the method of meditation called *budaodan*, “Sitting Through the Night.” She asked the Master how she might do this.

The Master responded, “‘Not to give rise to a single thought’ is the meditation of Sitting Through the Night.”

Dharma Steps

A newly ordained monk heard that a Chan Master lives the Dharma with every word he speaks and every action he takes. Considering this, he decided to pay particular attention to how the Grand Master put on his shoes.

The first time he observed him leaving the Grand Hall, the Master sat down to put on his shoes. The second time, leaving the office, the Master placed one hand against the wall and put on his shoes with the other hand. On the third occasion, leaving the Chan Hall, the Master slipped into his shoes by walking in them.

One day, shortly after making these observations, the novice monk read this passage from the *Diamond Sutra*: “The World Honored One put on his robe, took his alms-bowl, and went into the great city of Shravasti, going from house to house to beg for food.” The monk came to a sudden realization: What is important is his state of mind, not how he puts on his shoes.

Snakes and Cultivation

Located in the Yang Ming Mountains, Ling Chuan Monastery occasionally receives visits from snakes. One day, a large boa startled some nuns, who screamed out in surprise. Witnessing their reaction, the Master said to them, “This is not a courteous way to treat another sentient being that comes to cultivate its bodhi mind. You should get along in harmony.”

On another day, a small snake appeared inside the Chan Hall, moving in a pattern similar to the monks’ walking meditation. The attendant monk of the hall bent down to transmit the Three Refuges to the snake, and then asked it to leave. The snake persisted in its own “walking meditation” and showed no sign of leaving. Suddenly, the Master walked in and said, “Leave.” The snake went away immediately.

“Such is the difference between a good cultivator and an ordinary one,” sighed the monk.

Dropping the Beat

Buddhist chanting accompanied by the Dharma instruments can be challenging to perfect. Once, the monks were performing the morning service earnestly. Unexpectedly, the Master walked in with his hands folded behind his back. His eyes were cast down looking back and forth across the ground. The monk on duty hurried over and asked, “Shifu, are you searching for something?” The Master replied, “The beats! Haven’t you seen them? The beats are all over the floor! Go fetch a broom and sweep them up!”

After the service, the monks responsible for leading the service and playing the Dharma instruments knelt in front of the Buddha statue in penance.

Mirror Reflection

A certain monk had the habit of wearing a sweater over his shoulders with the sleeves tied in front. One day the Master was observed walking around the monastery with a sweater wrapped around his shoulders in exactly the same manner. When the monks saw this, they were amused and wondered among themselves, “Why is the Master dressed so strangely?” Just then, the sweater-draped monk walked in and saw the Master. Smiling to himself, the monk never wore a sweater this way again.