

KONG-AN COMMENTARY

Hyang Eom's up a Tree

Master Hyang Eom said, "It is like a man up a tree who is hanging from a branch by his teeth; his hands cannot grasp a bough; his feet cannot touch the tree (tied and bound).

"Another man under the tree asks him, 'Why did Bodhidharma come to China?'

"If he does not answer, he evades his duty (and will be killed). If he answers, he will lose his life.

"If you are in the tree, how do you stay alive?"

Mu Mun's comment:

*"Hyang Eom is a very bad man,
Spreading poison everywhere.
Monk's mouths made dumb,
Demons' eyes run through their bodies."*

*Case Five from the Mu Mun Kwan (No Gate Pass)
Translation by Zen Master Seung Sahn
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A Zen kong-an is a paradoxical story or statement used to test the clarity of a student's mind. Zen Master Seung Sahn has selected a representative group of kong-ans that he refers to as the "Ten Gates." He says that if you can answer these ten, then you can answer any other kong-an. The Fifth Gate, the famous "Hyang Eom's Up a Tree," is one of the most graphic illustrations of a kong-an. It is a "Kyung Chul Mun" type of kong-an, meaning "everything is stopped." We asked teachers in the Kwan Um School of Zen to comment on this kong-an. Their responses follow; a history of the kong-an itself is in the first commentary. □

George Bowman, JDPSN



The situation of this kong-an is that someone you care about comes to you and asks you a sincere question about your life, about your practice. "Why do you practice?" "What is the Dharma about?" If you open your mouth and give a long discourse about the meaning of it all, you lose your life, literally. If you attach to name and form, if you hold on to your ideas or opinions,

then you lose the spaciousness or aliveness of your life in the moment. If you don't respond, if you don't have anything to say or some offering or expression of what's most important in your life, then you end up bound in frustration, hiding your dharma-treasure. So what can you do? How can you let go?

Just a bit of history about this kong-an: Hyang Eom was a Zen monk who lived in ninth century China, and his teacher was the famous monk Wi Sahn (Chinese: Kuei-shan). Before Hyang Eom came to Wi Sahn, he had studied under the well-known teacher Pai-chang, who was also the teacher of Wi Sahn. It is said that Hyang Eom was a giant of a man, seven feet tall and powerfully built. He had a tremendous memory, similar to Ananda's, the chief disciple of the Buddha, who could remember all of Buddha's Dharma talks like a tape recorder. Hyang Eom too could read something or hear something just once and remember it verbatim. It turned out to be both a blessing and a curse for Hyang Eom. Although he remembered everything, he hadn't swallowed it and digested it and made it completely his own. In Zen practice we call it dry cognition or intellectual understanding, rather than the wisdom of just seeing and doing after the discriminating mind has been dropped.

One day his teacher came to him and said, "I do not want something that you have learned or memorized in your study. Just give me one word about your True Nature, before you knew about your mother or father or before you distinguished east from west. Just give me one authentic word without anything sticking to it."

Hyang Eom couldn't do it; he couldn't produce this one word. His mouth was filled with mashed potatoes, unable to say anything. He went back to his room and searched through all the texts, hoping to read enough of what the other Zen masters had said when confronted by their teachers, hoping he could find this one word in there and save the day for himself. Perhaps he went through all the traditional one word teachings: "sesame buns", "dry shit on a stick", "flag waving in the wind", "go drink tea", but the more he looked in his books for an answer to the question, the more difficult it became. In desperation, Hyang Eom went back to his teacher and asked

for help. But Wi Sahn was a tough teacher. He said, "I could tell you my experience of practice but it wouldn't help you in the slightest and in the long run would be doing you a disservice in your search. I won't tell you because I love you and because I want you to find out for yourself." Hyang Eom was confronted by an immovable barrier.

This reduced him to tears. His teacher wouldn't help him and he felt utterly miserable at having failed at the one thing which he cared most deeply about in his life. In despair, he said to himself, "You cannot fill an empty stomach with pictures of rice cakes." He burned all his books and all the notes he had made on different texts, and left Wi Sahn's temple in tears to go on a pilgrimage. After wandering around China, he arrived at an old dilapidated temple where the remains of the National Teacher Chu were buried. Hyang Eom took on the self-appointed job of the grave-keeper and stayed at the temple, cleaning the graveyard and the temple.

As the story goes, one day he was sweeping and raking the courtyard when a stone shot up and hit the bamboo. When he heard this sound of stone hitting the bamboo, Hyang Eom suddenly came to a realization. With laughter and tears in his eyes, he bowed in the direction of his teacher and, his heart filled with gratitude, said, "Master, your kindness is more touching than my parents'. If you had given me more explanations to feed my hungry mind, I would not have been forced to utterly let go."

Hyang Eom's poem at this moment came forth spontaneously:

*One stroke and all is gone,
No need of strategy or cure;
Each and every action manifests the ancient Way.
My spirit is never downcast,
I leave no tracks behind me,
Enlightenment is beyond speech, beyond gesture;
Those who are emancipated,
Call it the unsurpassed.*

So this was Hyang Eom's experience of really being lost and genuinely not knowing, really letting go of all his ideas and his hopes of what it meant to practice, letting go of all his opinions and conditions and all his expectations, and having some genuine dark night of his soul. And then hearing something purely . . . some pure and complete experience; this was Hyang Eom's awakening. In letting go of his ideas about Zen, he was reborn in this word of suchness. After he began teaching, it was said that he was a very stringent and difficult Zen master. He was very demanding and tough on the monks and nuns who trained with him. And he was famous for using the kong-an, "Man Up in a Tree."

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Hyang Eom's Up a Tree

George Bowman, JDPSN

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Wi Sahn asked Hyang Eom to produce one word. This is the kind of situation we most often encounter in an interview with a Zen master. While it seems incredibly easy to produce one word if you're in the presence of someone who is clear, who's practiced hard, it's quite challenging to produce one word with nothing sticking to it. This is what Wi Sahn was asking for, one word with nothing sticking to it. A completely original and sincere word. In other words, saying, "Good morning," with nothing behind it, so that there is only "Good morning." Or being able to say, "I'm so happy for you that you got your promotion," to a colleague without rancor of the heart, or envy hiding behind it. How can we authentically respond to such challenges in our lives? Hyang Eom couldn't do it when asked by Wi Sahn.

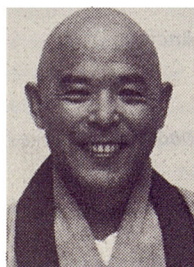
From the perspective of our sitting practice, the issue of the kong-an is: is it possible to let go? Is it possible to let go of that which we are clinging to, that which we are sticking to or that which we believe in some strange way will save us or help us? When you are sitting and watching your breath or just listening to this moment, is it possible to surrender to your breathing practice? Is it possible to let the breath move through you as you sit quietly doing your zazen, so that you're not trying to control the breath, you're not trying to shape it, but you're surrendering yourself and giving yourself over. You're letting go of your ideas, of your preoccupation with the future, or with yesterday or with the past. Is it possible to completely let go of this? This is the point of practice: to be able to let things be just the way they are in the openness of mind. The sounds of the evening, the sound of your breath, the sound of the city in the distance. The tapping of the stick, "tap, tap," without calling it the tap of the stick, or without looking the other way trying to ignore it. This is the kong-an: what is this tap, tap, tap? If you say it's the sound of tapping, then you're clinging by your teeth, making an object of your experience. If you try to ignore the question, or turn away, you miss the vividness of your life. How about it?

Whether we live in a Zen center, practice as a monk, or have the practice of our everyday life, I think the whole of any kind of spiritual practice has to do with a kind of surrender to the moment. But not a blind surrender, or a thoughtless surrender. It really has to do with an open-hearted and conscious surrendering to this moment, or to your family, or to your partner, or to your sitting or to your breath. This surrender is very different from a blind surrender to a teacher, to being a member of a Zen center, or a church or an organization or family or university or any group at all for that matter. There is something very authentic about conscious surrender, or this letting go when you're hanging in space, or hanging from a rock, and taking complete responsibility for what may come

of it. That's what's asked of us in this kong-an. Not to give yourself over to the narrowness, but give yourself over to the complete fullness of life in this moment. It's not, "Well, I'll give myself over to this moment if I like it. I'll give myself over to the bagel with cream cheese, but I won't give myself over to the oatmeal that was slightly burnt or the tofu that wasn't done well."

Zen practice is not a growth practice; it's a letting go practice. It's a different practice than trying to shape the self into becoming strong or better or being able to cope, or being able to grow, or being more willful. This is a practice of willingness to experience all that's going on in this life. And in the willingness to experience life as it is there is the dissolving of selfishness and the deep appreciation of this boundless life. Like Hyang Eom, if we practice in a heartfelt and vigorous way, an insight may occur in some totally unexpected moment. Nevertheless, it is necessary to continually practice to incorporate this insight into our everyday life, to make our life an expression of what we know in our hearts to be true. In that sense, this wonderful practice continues endlessly. □

Mu Deung Sunim, JDPSN



*Empty Mirror cannot hold on
to Blue Sky or Green Pine Trees' Sound
Mystic Energy without Time and Space
Has no coming, Has no going.*

*Before Hyang Eom
Already clean in front of you.
Why then did Bodhidharma
Come to China?*

*Open your mouth you're already dead.
Close your mouth already too late.
Why?
Even Yaaaaahaa is not enough.
?????????*

*Ha Ha Ha Ha
(Ask Mang Gong)
Chicken Crowing at 3 a.m.
Moon Setting at 7 a.m.
Wake up! Wake up!
Spring Sun Shining on Complete World*



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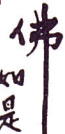
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Hyang Eom's Man Up a Tree

Jacob Perl, JDPSN



Adapted from comments made following a talk at the Providence Zen Center in December, 1989.

The Hua Yen Sutra that the last speaker talked about, like other sutras, is a collection of teaching techniques that the Buddha used. When Paul finished his introductory remarks he hit the floor and said, "Wall is white." Then he said,

"That's my dharma." This point is really the essence of the Hua Yen Sutra, which means that our practice and all sutras finally come to one thing only . . . what is our correct situation, correct relationship and correct function at this moment, any given moment of our life.

Our correct situation means our work situation, our speech situation, our eye-ear-nose-tongue-body-and-mind situation. Our correct relationship is not only to other people, but also our correct relationship to the air, the water, to the ground. Out of all this our correct function appears, which means that our eyes, ears, nose, tongue, body, and mind can function without any hindrance. While we talk about correct situation, correct relationship and correct function, they are in fact inseparable.

One of the kong-ans that we have in the Mu Mun Kwan is the situation that was set up by Zen Master Hyang Eom: "It is like a man hanging from a tree. He is holding to a branch by his teeth. His hands and his legs are all tied, so he cannot grasp another branch, and he cannot grasp the trunk of the tree. Then just at that time somebody comes and asks him "Why did Bodhidharma come to China?" If he does not answer, he is avoiding his duty and will be killed. If he opens his mouth to answer, he will fall off the tree and also die." Then if you are in this tree how will you stay alive? It's a very difficult situation. This is a very interesting kind of a kong-an because any understanding cannot help. Any understanding which we have will fail. We cannot do anything. Cannot move hands, cannot use mouth, but there's one thing . . . just one thing that's possible.

Zen means to attain our true self. To attain our true self means that truth can function in our life. To let truth function in our life is not to attach to life or death. Without attaching to life or death, we allow love and compassion to naturally function in our life, which means that our obligation to this world is always very clear. We say life, but life is not life. Our body has life and death, but our true life, our true self, has no life nor death. If we can let truth function in our life, then even this kind of a difficult situation is not so difficult. Then even in such a difficult situation our correct situation, correct relationship and correct function appear, which means we

attain true life. Holding on to either life or death, we are like walking corpses. Not holding on to life and death, we are truly alive.

The situation that Zen Master Hyang Eom set up as a Dharma gate for us may appear somewhat exotic. If we examine our lives, however, we may be able to see this situation all too often. In fact, any time that we create and hold on to some duality, we are like this man in the tree. I remember some foolish arguments I had with my parents, whom I tried to convince of the correctness of my ways. It was only when I gave up such foolish notions and simply did what was necessary that our relationship became very intimate, very alive. Maybe that happened to some of you, maybe in some different way.

What this kong-an does is challenge us to find the true way by setting up a seemingly impossible situation. Indeed, it challenges us to the utmost, where it is not enough to be clever. How do we work then with a situation like that? The way to work with it is to leave it alone, only keep don't know. If your practice is mantra practice then only try mantra. If you're keeping a big question, "What am I?" or "What is this?", only keep big question, only keep don't know. Then the kong-an will work by itself. One day the kong-an will appear vivid and completely translucent. The correct response will be there. But, it is completely redundant to want something vivid, or something translucent, or something that you do not have in this very moment. To do that is to be lost in the dream world, to lose one's life.

"The man hanging from a branch" kong-an, or any kong-an, is not so important. Most important is to wake up. Be alive! Then, what are you doing right now? □

Robert Genthner, JDPSN



*That bastard Bodhidharma
Coming from the west
Spreading madness
Snaring minds
By what bridge did he cross the
Yangtze River anyway?*

KATZ!

*Sun shines down on the meadow.
Rain falls from the sky.
Blue flowers spring up.
Everywhere! □*

Richard Shrobe, JDPSN



This kong-an presents a very interesting situation. The rather dramatic image of the man up a tree is a vivid portrayal of two existential situations or issues that we all have to face. First, what does it really mean to stay alive, or be alive? And the second issue is about responsiveness. someone under the tree is calling out, "Help me out here. Tell me something. Give me something."

This raises questions about relationship and correct situation and responsibility. Responsibility, in this sense, means the ability to respond. How is one to respond in such a situation?

There's a similar Zen story in which a man is being chased by a tiger, and he's running for his life. He gets to the edge of a cliff and can't go any further, but he sees a vine going over the cliff, so he grabs hold of it, swings over, and is hanging there. Down below, he sees another tiger — waiting. The man is hanging there with one tiger above and another below. Then, a field mouse begins to gnaw at the vine right above him. Just at that moment, this man sees one wild strawberry growing on the vine right near him, and without holding back anything he bites the strawberry. What a taste!

This story is about the first issue of the kong-an only. It's about life and death and what it really means to be alive or dead. But there's no element of relationship in the story. There's no one calling to the person to respond. But both stories portray people pushed to the limit.

We have already seen how Hyang Eom's training and his struggle were very intense. He was pushed to the limit. So the kong-an that he made to test his students is also of a very intense kind. A man is up a tree hanging from a branch by his teeth. And everything is tied. This state of being tied means he can't hold onto any conception, anymore. Also, his feet have no resting place — he can't find support in the usual ways that he was used to finding support. At that time, someone calls to him, "Please help me." How does he stay alive?

Jesus addressed the question of being truly alive in his saying, "It's easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to get to heaven." In many spiritual traditions, there is the notion that one only really becomes alive when one strips away everything. This is variously referred to as renunciation, non-attachment, letting go of ideas, conceptions, opinions, frames of reference, and one's orientation towards oneself and the world. If one lets go of it all, one becomes really poor — has nothing.

There's another story, a favorite of mine, also from the

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Hyang Eom's Up a Tree

Richard Shrobe, JDPSN

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New Testament that speaks in a different way to this issue of what it really means to stay alive. After the Last Supper, Christ tells his disciples, "You will all fall away because of me this night," and they all say, "No, no, no, no." His main disciple, Peter, whose name means "the rock," says, "Master, I would never deny you." And Jesus says to him, "Peter, before the cock crows this very morning, you will have denied knowing me three times."

Jesus is then arrested and Peter goes and stands outside of where they have taken Jesus into captivity. When he is asked if he is one of Jesus' followers, he says, "No, no, no — I don't know the man." Three times — "No, no, no — I don't know." Now that's a very interesting point. He denies knowing his

master, whom he loves dearly, three times. Yet he goes on after Jesus' death to become the organizing force in the Christian movement, the first pope.

That's the Bodhisattva way, just try — over and over and over again. We sometimes say, "Try, try, try for ten thousand years non-stop." The story of Peter may seem extreme, but it is instructive nevertheless. As another Zen saying goes, "If you fall down seven times, get up eight times."

Facing our failings and our weakness and yet still again rousing up that energy of "try" is very much connected to our view of what it really means to be alive, to enliven our environment, to enliven our relationship and to be able to really be responsible and responsive.

Adapted from a talk given at Chogye International Zen Center of New York on April 1, 1990. □

Barbara Rhodes, JDPSN



It is taught that this kong-an has only one answer that will truly release all the tethers that tie us to our ignorance. Only one response will be universally received as correct: "Ah, that's it, that's how you stay alive!"

What is that answer? How do you stay alive? How can you generously offer your wisdom while tied and bound, dangling above a fatal fall with only the

grip of your teeth to save you?

The gift that is offered by this kong-an is total bondage, total physical and intellectual bondage. Only a Zen student would be so foolish as to accept such a gift. Only a Zen student would recognize it as a gift, rather than seeing it as a manipulative mind game that has no answer.

Open the gift. Inside is only don't know. Such an expensive gift, and yet few will accept it. Accepting it means abandoning the familiar, and that can be terrifying. And yet, not knowing is very familiar territory for us all, a place where we can be empowered. Not knowing allows us to let go of false assumptions. It frees us of preconceptions and attachments. When the mind doesn't know, it is sitting exactly in this moment. When it is in this moment, it is wide open . . . a perfect receptor . . . a perfect reflector.

In the Temple Rules of the Kwan Um School of Zen, it says, "In original nature there is no this and that. The Great Round Mirror has no likes or dislikes." No likes or dislikes means letting conditioned, structured mind states dissolve so that our natural wisdom and compassion can manifest themselves. In

Zen, this wise and compassionate state is simply called having a clear mind.

The Buddha gave all kinds of teaching, and he said that he taught that way to save all different kinds of minds. But if there is no mind, then there is nothing to save. So, if you can completely engage in the question, the "don't know" that a kong-an offers, where is your mind? Doing meditation and a kong-an practice, tapping into the generosity of those techniques, your mind becomes very spacious.

Even while being tied and bound, our mind can feel as spacious as the sky. Look up at the sky and think of it as your mind. The sky doesn't have any hindrances. If a cloud appears, the sky doesn't complain. If there is thunder and lightning, if there's pollution, it remains just as spacious. There is no tightening, no fear. Our practice can help us to open to those qualities, so that we're not hindered by the ropes around our limbs and the fall beneath our feet. Just in that moment — don't know — be in relationship with that situation. How do you stay alive?

Out of this spaciousness comes the ability to realize our wisdom and remember how to be in relationship with the lessons, the opportunities that appear in our life. Few ever say it is easy. A wise teacher will encourage cultivation of patience, forbearance, generosity, precepts . . . encourage courage.

And then, what? We have the sky for inspiration, our teacher's encouragement, total support from the tree's branch. How do we share in the generosity?

KATZ!

The universe awaits your response. □