

Excerpted from  
Zen Master Wu Kwang's  
upcoming Shambhala book  
*Drink Cold Water:  
Talks on the Teachings  
of Korean Zen Masters,  
Ancient and Modern*

# Ma'tsu, Tsi-Tsang, and the Early Korean Masters

[Hits the floor once with Zen stick.]

Can this be explained or not?

[Hits floor.]

Can this be understood or not?

[Hits floor.]

If you say this can be explained and understood, then you are attaching to words and concepts and miss the basic fact. On the other hand, if you say this cannot be explained and cannot be understood, then how can the Zen dharma be taught to all beings? What can you do?

KATZ!

Look clearly: A crow's head is black, a crane's head is white.

## Ma-tsu's Four Words and One Hundred Negations

There is an old Zen story titled "Four Words and One Hundred Negations" which appears both in *The Blue Cliff Records* (the Seventy-Third Case) and *The Book of Serenity*. I will read the case:

A monk asked Great Master Ma, "Please, Master, going beyond the four words and one hundred negations, directly point out to me the meaning of the coming from the West." Master Ma said, "I'm tired today and can't explain to you. Go ask Tsi-Tsang." When the monk asked Tsi-Tsang, Tsi-Tsang said, "Why didn't you ask the Master?" The monk replied, "The Master had me come ask

you." Tsang told him, "I have a headache today. I can't explain to you. Go ask Elder Brother Hai." So the monk then asked Elder Brother Hai [also known as Pai-Chang]. Hai said, "At this point, all the more I don't understand." When the monk related this to Great Master Ma, Master Ma said, "Tsang's head is white, Hai's head is black."

Before examining the case, I want to say a little about the cast of characters. The three monks named here have a strong connection not only to the Chinese Zen tradition, but also to the Korean Zen tradition. Of these three, a lot has been written about the Great Master Ma, whose full name is Ma-tsu (*J. Baso Doitsu K. Ma Jo*). There is also a fair amount about Zen Master Pai-chang (*J. Hyakujo Ekai K. Baek Jang*). But there is little written about Ti-ts'ang (*J. Jizo K. Ji Jang*).

Ti-ts'ang, who was born in 735 C.E., became a novice monk and began following a teacher when he was eight years old. When he was twenty-five, he took full monk's precepts. Later, hearing about the Zen teaching that Great Master Ma-tsu was giving in the mountains, Ti-ts'ang went to be his student and eventually became his successor.

Ma-tsu was well-known and had hundreds of students, but only 139 earned his permission to teach and start Zen groups in different parts of China. Among those 139, Ti-ts'ang, Pai-chang, and Nan-ch-uan (*J. Nansen Fugan K. Nam Cheon*) were considered the greatest. When Ma-tsu died, the monks in his assembly asked Ti-ts'ang to teach in Ma-tsu's place. He taught for many years before passing away in 814.

A few other stories about Ti-ts'ang have survived. One tells of the time Ma-tsu sent him to take a letter to the national teacher at the capital. When Ti-ts'ang got there, the national teacher asked him, "What kind of teaching is Ma-tsu giving these days?" Ti-ts'ang, without opening his mouth, walked from the east side of the hall to the west side, then stood still. The national teacher asked, "Only that? Or is there something else besides?" Ti-ts'ang then walked from the west side of the hall back to the east and again stood still. The national teacher then said, "That's what you have learned from Ma-tsu, but what do you have that's your own?" Ti-ts'ang replied, "I've already shown you, Master."

This reminds me of an exchange I had with a student some years ago while leading a retreat at the Cambridge Zen Center. She was a long-time student in the Kwan Um Zen school, but had become angry at Zen Master Seung Sahn.

# Zen is not necessarily about developing some

She started the interview by telling me how angry she was, then began enumerating what she felt were his faults and shortcomings. She went on for a long time; I listened and listened and listened. Finally, at a certain point she seemed to have expended herself, so I said to her, "Zen Master Seung Sahn always teaches this [*hits floor*]. If you don't imitate him, how will you reveal it?" Immediately, without thinking, she hit the floor and burst out laughing, loudly and fully. When she finished, she [*hits floor*] digested this in a way she had never digested it before.

Ti-ts'ang makes *his* statement when he walks from east to west, west to east, and then stands still. When the national teacher says, "That is your teacher's, but what is *yours*?" Ti-ts'ang replies, "I've already shown you." Zen is not necessarily about developing some kind of originality. Zen is about digesting and assimilating clear perception and clear understanding. If originality emerges, then originality emerges. If it is strictly this [*hits floor*] once again, then it is just that once again for the very first time.

On another occasion, Zen Master Chih-kung said to Ti-ts'ang, "The sun is rising too early," and Ti-ts'ang replied, "Just on time."

When Ti-ts'ang first left Ma-tsu's temple, he established his own teaching center at a place called Ti-ts'ang. (He adopted that name as his own). Once a layman came for an interview and asked Ti-ts'ang, "Is there heaven and hell?" Ti-ts'ang answered, "Yes, there is." The layman then asked, "Do the three jewels of Buddha, dharma, and sangha exist?" "Yes, they do." The layman asked many more questions of a philosophical nature, and with each one, Ti-ts'ang answered in the affirmative. Finally the layman asked, "Don't you make a mistake by answering this way?" Ti-ts'ang replied, "Have you called on other teachers before?" The layman said he had called on Zen Master Ching-shan. "What did Ching-shan have to say?" Ti-ts'ang asked. "Ching-shan said that none of these things exist." Ti-ts'ang then inquired, "Do you have a wife?" The layman said he did. "Does Zen Master Ching-shan have a wife?" "No, he doesn't." Then Ti-ts'ang commented, "Well, for him it's appropriate to say none of these things exist." [*laughter*] The layman bowed, thanked him for his teaching, then left.

Around this time, the late 700s to early 800s—long before Zen went into Japan, Vietnam or any of these countries to the east of China—monks came from Korea and studied with a number of Great Master Ma-tsu's students. After returning to Korea, they founded what became known as the Nine Mountain Schools, the earliest Zen tradition in Korea. The schools were not different in their teaching, but were located on nine different mountains. Three of the founding masters were students of Ti-ts'ang, including Zen Master Toui, who died in 825. He had gone to China in 784 and returned to Korea in 818. Actually, both Ti-ts'ang and Pai-chang recognized his ability and sanctioned him as a teacher.

Not much of Toui's teaching has come down to us, but I will read one short section of it. Toui had been asked by a scholar about certain philosophical points in Buddhism. In response, he just held up one fist and said, "All of the teachings of the scriptures are contained in this." The questioner asked, "Then what is the purpose of believing, understanding, practicing and realizing, and what can these achieve?" Toui responded, "Zen is to make one believe, practice and realize the principle of without thought, without cultivation. What matters is the direct pointing to the true nature of your mind. Therefore, in the five divisions of the teachings there is also, besides the scriptural teachings, mind-to-mind transmission. Worshiping Buddha statues is nothing more than resorting to an expedient for those who do not understand true nature. However many scriptures you have finished reading over the many years, I think you will not understand through them the way of mind-to-mind transmission."

Zen Master Hyech'ol was another who went to China and studied with Ti-ts'ang, although he arrived only in 814, the year Ti-ts'ang passed away. It is said, however, that Hyech'ol's practice was so strong that Ti-ts'ang was able to give him sanction and establish him as a teacher even though their contact was short.

According to a story telling of Hyech'ol's arrival in China, he happened to be traveling on a boat carrying a bunch of criminals. When they docked at the port in China, Hyech'ol was mistaken for one of the prisoners and brought

# kind of originality.

before the magistrate. All he would say in his defense was that he was a monk. The magistrate did not believe him and sentenced him along with the others. After that, Hyech'ol just sat in a deep state of meditation. He did not protest; he just sat there. The magistrate decided to execute thirty of the convicts as an example to anyone else, and Hyech'ol was included in that group. As he awaited execution, Hyech'ol remained in the deep state of meditation. The magistrate thought this was rather odd and asked who he was. Finally, becoming convinced that Hyech'ol was, indeed, a monk, the magistrate released him. It is said in the story that when he was arrested Hyech'ol did not particularly protest or look disturbed and when he was released he did not particularly seem overjoyed, he just went on his way.

A short piece of Hyech'ol's teaching also has come down to us. Hyech'ol said, "Originally there is no such thing as Buddha, but by necessity the name was given to him. Originally there is no such thing as mind. To attain enlightenment is to realize the one thing. For the sake of illustration, it is said that the one thing is empty, but it is not really empty—mind of no mind is the true mind, wisdom of no wisdom is the true wisdom."

Hong-Jik, another monk who studied with Ti-ts'ang, returned to Korea and became a great Zen master. Although little is known of him, he is mentioned in an inscription on another Zen master's memorial plaque. It states, "As for Hong-Jik's Zen spirit, he practiced it without any trace of practice, attained enlightenment without any enlightenment. In his daily meditation he was always quiet like a great mountain, and when he moved it was as if all the echoes of the great mountain were roaring."

Now, returning to the case, the first paragraph says, "A monk asked Great Master Ma, 'Please, Master, going beyond the four words and one hundred negations, directly point out to me the meaning of the coming from the West.'" There is a note at the bottom of the page regarding the four words and one hundred negations: "Four words are 'Existence is emptiness, no-existence is no-emptiness.'" These four words are repeatedly negated according to some procedure of Indian philosophy to make one hundred negations.

This is in accordance with the philosophy of the *Heart Sutra*. Sometimes the four words are expressed as four propositions: existence, non-existence; both existence and non-existence; and neither existence nor non-existence.

An old commentary says, "Existence is slander by exaggeration. Non-existence is slander by underestimation. Both existence and non-existence are slander by contradiction. Neither existence nor non-existence is slander by intellectual fabrication." Another way of saying that is, "Everything is not it, nothing is not it." This means it is just like the Zen circle: full, empty, complete. Each and every thing is full and empty and complete just as it is.

This case talks about going beyond, or abandoning, the four propositions and one hundred negations, and then asks about the meaning of Bodhidharma's coming from the West. "Why did Bodhidharma (*C. P'u-t'i-ta-mo J. Daruma*) come to China from India?" is a standard Zen phrase that means, "What is the living meaning of Buddhism? What is the living meaning of Zen?" You could ask, "Abandoning or not abandoning, going beyond or not going beyond, where is the living meaning of Buddhism not already clear?"

In a later, similar story, Zen Master Ang Sahn (*C. Yang-shan J. Kyozan Ejaku*) has a dream in which he gives a dharma speech in one of the celestial realms. He mounts the rostrum and hits the gavel on the table, then says, "The dharma of the great wide vehicle goes beyond the four propositions and the one hundred negations. Listen carefully, listen carefully."

If you listen full of care and allow the true spirit of listening to emerge spontaneously, that is the great wide vehicle of compassionate connection with this world. To *just listen* is a rare, rare event, but it is nothing special.

In the case, Ma-tsu says it a little differently. He does not say, "Listen carefully, listen carefully." When the monk asks, "Going beyond the four propositions and the one hundred negations [the totality of Buddhist philosophy, everything that is taught in the scriptures and in the teaching], directly point out for me the meaning of the coming from the West [the living spirit of Zen]," he is asking Ma-tsu to show it to him as a living fact, not as verbal philosophizing and conceptualizing. When Ma-tsu says, "*I'm tired today and can't explain to you,*" those words already reveal the living meaning of Buddhism. No doubt this monk thought Ma-tsu's answer was going to be something extraordinary, something unusual.

In the introduction to this case, written three to four hundred years after the interchange actually happened, there is a statement about this *not explaining*:

Zen Master Yuan-Wu said, "In explaining the dharma, there is neither explanation nor teaching. In listening to the dharma, there is neither hearing nor attainment. Since explanation neither explains nor teaches, how can it compare to not explaining? Since listening neither hears nor attains, how can it compare to not listening? Still, no explaining and no listening, still amount to something."

One of Ma-tsu's other students, Layman Pang said, "My great attainment is when I'm tired, I sleep; when I'm hungry, I eat." You could add to that a third: "If someone else is hungry, then give them something to eat."

Ma-tsu's teaching, as well as the teaching of his school and his successors, was fundamentally about the function of our natural being—to not hold anything and to just let the function of our natural being emerge: eating time, just eat; sleeping time, just sleep. "I'm tired today" is just *I'm tired today*. That is all. Sad time, just sad. Happy time, just happy. Relating time, just connect. This means, just let your natural function come forward and connect with the situation. That is the impetus for feeding someone else if he or she is hungry. To function naturally does not mean, "I do exactly what I please." It means I let my natural function emerge as it connects with the exact situation I am in. If someone is hungry, connect with that. If someone is sad, connect with that. If someone is happy, connect with that. Moment by moment let the natural function emerge and connect.

Ma-tsu says, "I'm tired today and can't explain to you. Go ask Ti-ts'ang." If this monk had been really sharp at that time, he would have just bowed to Ma-tsu and said, "It's already appeared, no need to go ask Ti-ts'ang. Thank you for your not explaining." But the monk did not quite get it, so he innocently went on to Ti-ts'ang. From one point of view, this story is about three thieves and an innocent. Each of the thieves is teaching something, but the innocent is also teaching something just by his guilelessness.

When the monk asks Ti-ts'ang, he responds, "Why didn't you ask the Master?" "But I did ask the Master," says the monk, "and he told me to come here and ask you." Ti-ts'ang immediately replies, "I have a headache today and can't explain." *I have a headache* is just "I have a headache," explaining is extra. Ti-ts'ang's answer is the second revelation of the living meaning of the Zen tradition. Then Ti-ts'ang tells the monk, "Go ask Elder Brother Hai," and when he does, Hai says, "At this point, all the more I don't understand."

Now we have *can't explain, can't explain, don't understand*. Explaining is the four propositions and the one hundred negations. Not explaining, not understanding is the transcendence of ideas, concepts, words and speech. When the monk related this to Great Master Ma, Ma said, "Tsang's head is white, Hai's head is black." This last statement is enigmatic. In the poem after the case, there is a line that says, "Great Master Lin Chi isn't yet a thief who can steal in broad daylight." This relates to a comment Zen Master Seol Bong (C. Hsueh-feng J. Seppo Gison) made when he heard a story of Lin-chi's encounter with a particular monk. Lin-chi (J. Rinzai) had suddenly put forward something of a shocking nature to this monk. Seol Bong said, "Lin Chi is very much like a thief who steals in broad daylight." This means he has suddenly taken something away from the monk. But the poem says he is not yet a thief who can steal in broad daylight, meaning that compared to the three thieves in this story, Lin-chi is not so sharp; he is not such a clever thief. Those three can pull it off in broad daylight: "I'm tired, can't explain," "I have a headache, can't explain," "At this point, I don't understand." That is real thievery. By comparison, Lin-chi is too rough, too obvious.

In *The Book of Serenity* there is a comment about this particular line: "This is very much like Hu Bai, the thief who was robbed by trickery by Hu Hai." An old Chinese legend tells of a thief named Hu Bai who was tricked by another thief, Hu Hai. One of them wore a white bandana and the other a black bandana. Here, when Ma-tsu is told about Ti-ts'ang's comment and Pai-chang's (Hai's) comment, he says, "Tsang's head is white, Hai's head is black." This means these two were great thieves, and of those two, the one who had the best trickery was the one who said, "I do not understand."

"Neither existence nor non-

That is very much at the heart of the Korean Zen tradition: *Don't understand, don't know*. If you completely *don't know*, then conceptualization is all taken away. This points to the teacher and the teaching as thieves, meaning that the teaching has to have the ability to cut off the flow of words and speech, ideas and concepts, and take that away from the student. If you sit meditation or observe your mind in daily activities, you may notice that once you get past the stage of settling your distracted mind, you will almost continuously be explaining your experience to yourself moment by moment by moment. We all tend to engage in this ongoing commentary on living, trying to consolidate our ground or to feel more secure about our experience. Yet, this ongoing explanation is, in its fundamental form, a lie. These explanations are not the actual facts of our experience. That is why Ma-tsu and his student Ti-ts'ang both say, "Can't explain." When the teaching takes away from you, either suddenly or gradually, this ongoing commentary on your own experiences, then you fall into your actual living experience completely, without separation. It is important to have all that commentary stolen away from you. That is why a commentator says that these three are thieves, the third being the greatest thief. If you completely let go of concepts and completely and only *don't know*, moment by moment, then each thing becomes clear as it is.

Zen Master Wu-tsu (*J. Goso Hoen*), commenting on the line about the head of one thief being white and the other black, says simply, "Mister Dust Sweeper." In Buddhism, you find the word dust used in a particular way. For example, there is the story about the Sixth Patriarch's poem. The head monk had written a poem on the wall of the monastery, which said, "The body is the Bodhi tree [the place where Buddha sat and attained his enlightenment],/The mind is the clear mirror's stand./Constantly we should clean them, so that no dust collects." Then the Sixth Patriarch composed a poem challenging that one, saying, "Bodhi [Sanskrit for wisdom] has no tree. The clear mirror has no stand. Originally nothing. Where is dust?"

One time Zen Master Joju (*C. Chao-chou J. Joshu*) was sweeping the courtyard in his monastery. A monk said to him, "In this

immaculate and pristine place, where can you find dust?" Joju immediately replied, "Here's another little bit," meaning if you make too much of a big deal about there being nothing, then that is also dust. On the one hand, clean dust; on the other, where is dust?

Dust in Buddhist philosophy means each phenomenal occurrence. For example, if you look at a beam of light indoors, you may see dust particles floating, millions upon millions of phenomena. The whole world of phenomenal experience is referred to as dust because each and every phenomena is a momentary flash of existence. If you sit in meditation and watch your experience, you will see each thing flash into existence moment by moment by moment.

Sometimes all the various senses are referred to as dust. What this means is, if you relate to seeing or hearing or sensing and feeling in a dualistic way—subject is here, object is over there—that is creating dust. But if subject and object, inside and outside, all—*ptchh!*—come together, then that is just complete seeing, complete hearing, complete sensing. Sometimes the whole world is referred to as "dust world." (*Cf.*, Luke 6:39-42. Eccles. 12:7.)

So in commenting on these thieves by saying, "Mister Dust Sweeper," Zen Master Wu-tsu is implying that we have to sweep away the sense of expectation in our practice. We all come to practice with some set of expectations, some of them quite obvious, some subtle. The longer you practice, the more you see the infinity of expectations we all have the capacity to bring to something as simple as just sitting, just walking, just listening, just eating, just sleeping, just helping someone. It is necessary to sweep away all those expectations and all of the conceptual superstructure that we build around our experiences. If you do that, then you fall into the world of *just now, just as it is*.

I hope that we all can allow the teaching to steal all of that away from us and go on to help this world with its very large headache.

[Hits floor three times.]

#### Work Cited

*The Book of Serenity*. Hsing-Hsui. Trans. T. Cleary. Boston: Shambhala, 1998.

existence is slander by intellectual fabrication."