

*Mistake.
Failure.
These designations come from where?
Haahh!!
Why do you make all that? What are you doing just now?*

The Elegant

Looking into Zen Kong-ans from the Blue Cliff Record and the Wu-men-kuan

It is possible to look at failure in a variety of ways. In the *Wu-men-kuan* (*Mumonkan*; *Mu Mun Kwan*), Case Forty-two is based on a fable derived from a Buddhist scripture. Zen Master Wu-men takes this story and uses it as a kong-an:

Once, long ago Mun Su Bosal (Monju: Manjushri) went to a gathering of all Buddhas. Just then, all the Buddhas returned to their original seats. Only one woman remained, seated near Shakyamuni Buddha, deep in samadhi. Mun Su Sari asked the Buddha, "Why can a woman sit so close to you and I cannot?" The Buddha told Mun Su Sari, "You wake her up from samadhi and ask her yourself." Mun Su Sari walked around the woman three times and snapped his fingers. Then, he took her in the palm of his hand, carried her to heaven and used transcendent energy on her, but could not wake her up. Buddha said, "If one hundred Mun Su Saris appeared, they also could not wake her up. Down below, past twelve hundred million countries, there is Ma Myung Bosal, who will be able to wake her up from samadhi." Immediately, Ma Myung Bosal emerged out of the earth and bowed to the Buddha, who gave him the command. Ma Myung walked in front of the woman and snapped his fingers only once. At this, the woman woke up from samadhi and stood up from her seat.

That is the case. Then there is a short poem:

*Come out, not come out,
both are already free.
God's head and demon's face.
The failure, how elegant.¹*

As you can tell, there is a cast of characters here. One is Shakyamuni Buddha, the historical Buddha. Another is Mun Su Sari Bosal, also known as Manjushri Bodhisattva (Skt). He represents the enlightened nature of universal, primordial wisdom. Then there is another character, Ma Myung Bosal. Since *Bosal* means Bodhisattva, he too is an enlightened being. *Ma Myung* translates as *Ensnared Light*. His name, then, is Ensnared Light Bodhisattva. He

is nowhere near as lofty and celestial as Manjushri, but emerges from earth. Finally, there is a woman sitting in deep meditative absorption. In India at that time women were generally regarded as second-class citizens. This is why the question appears, "Why can a woman sit so close to you and I cannot?"

A long time ago, according to the story, in some distant, far-off land not of our realm, all the Buddhas had a convocation. But, although Manjushri was traditionally called the teacher of the seven Buddhas, he had not been invited to this gathering. Because Manjushri represents wisdom, it follows that the teacher of all Buddhas is clear wisdom. Of course, all of this is allegorical, so actually we are being represented here.

At first we are told that Manjushri is not invited to this convocation of the Buddhas, but that finally he is allowed to enter. Just as he does so, all the other Buddhas return to their original places, wherever the original place of all Buddhas may be. (Maybe we will find that sometime in our Zen meditation.) As they return, only a woman remains. Seated near Shakyamuni, she is in deep samadhi, deep meditation. She does not know anything; she does not hear anything; she is just at one with everything. Manjushri asks the Buddha, "Why can this woman sit so close to you and I cannot?" The Buddha replies, "Why don't you wake her up from samadhi and ask her, yourself?" Manjushri tries to do so, using all of his powers, but the woman does not move at all.

Now, of course, the reason she does not move is because Manjushri is representative of the realm of equality, total equality, absolute equality. In total equality, there is no going into and no coming out of; there is no before and no after. Of course, he cannot wake her, because he is immersed in total equality. Then the Buddha says in effect, "Even if a hundred of you, even if a thousand of you appeared, still you wouldn't be able to wake her up," because Manjushri represents the zero point. Even if you have a hundred zeroes, they still equal zero; even if you have a thousand zeroes, they still equal only zero.

"But down below," Buddha continues, "past hundreds of millions of countries [meaning not in this celestial realm, but on earth] there is another Bodhisattva. His name is Ensnared Light [another translation of his name is Deluded Consciousness]. He can awaken her." You see, he understands about coming and going, entering into and leaving out of, all of these things that are not of Manjushri's realm.

Failure

Book excerpt by Zen Master Wu Kwang

Just then, Ensnared Light Bodhisattva emerges from earth. This is a wonderful image: From out of earth emerges a Bodhisattva. (And our practice, of course, always has to be rooted in this solid earth.) When the Bodhisattva emerges, Buddha gives him the command. He walks up, snaps his fingers once and the woman awakens.

After the case and poem, there is Wu-men's prose comment:

Buddha acted out a complex play having nothing in common with minor trivia.

Now tell me: Manjushri was the teacher of seven Buddhas; why couldn't he get the woman out of absorption? Ensnared Light was a bodhisattva of the first stage; why was he able to get her out?

If you can see intimately here [that is, in first-hand experience], you will attain the great dragonic absorption even in the flurry of active consciousness.²

The last line is particularly interesting. If you can see intimately here, into this point—why one could get her out and the other could not—then you will attain great samadhi, a great absorption, like a powerful dragon, even in the flurry of active consciousness.

There are other translations that give different versions of the last line quoted above. If you combine them, the nuance of the comment emerges more strongly. A second translation says, "If you can see into this intimately, then in the flurry of karma and discrimination you are a dragon of great samadhi."³ Then, a third one, "If you can grasp this completely, you will realize that surging, delusive consciousness is nothing other than the greatest samadhi."⁴ And the last one, "If you can firmly grasp this point, then for you this busy life of ignorance and discrimination will be the same as supreme satori."⁵ I like this last one best, because it relates to *this busy life of ignorance and discrimination*, which we all know only too well.

The poem's different versions also show interesting nuances. Our version says:

*Come out, not come out,
Both are already free.
God's head and demon's face.
The failure, how elegant.*⁶

Another version of this same poem reads:

*One can awaken her, the other cannot;
Both have their own freedom.
A god-mask here and a devil-mask there;
Even in failure, an elegant performance.*⁷

In this one, the second line says, "Both have their own freedom." Yamada Roshi, who was the translator, writes in a little comment here, "Take the example of a jet plane about to take off. A hundred thousand Manjushris might not be able to get it started, but a jet pilot could do so very easily."

Then another translator says:

*One can bring her out, the other cannot;
both of them are free.
A god mask; a devil mask—
the failure is an elegant performance.*⁸

The fourth translation, by Zen Master Shibayama, has similar lines, except that the last line says:

*The failure is wonderful, indeed.*⁹

This kong-on focuses us on the various forms of failure. When we read Zen stories, the usual focus is one of success; someone usually gets enlightened. But there is often another aspect; for example, there is the famous story of Buddha holding up a flower on Vulture Peak. This recounts how, once, a long time ago, Shakyamuni Buddha was about to give his dharma speech on Vulture Peak, where 1,200 people were assembled, including: monks, nuns, laywomen, laymen. They waited and waited for Buddha to give his talk. But Buddha did not say anything. He just sat silently on the rostrum. The audience waited in expectation. Eventually, the Buddha picked up a flower and held it up. We are told, "No one understood, except Mahakashyapa, who smiled. Then Buddha said, 'I have the all-pervading true Dharma, exquisite teaching of formless form and incomparable nirvana, a special transmission outside the sutras, not dependent on words and speech. This I give to you, Mahakashyapa.'"

That is a story of success for Mahakashyapa who understood the Buddha's gesture. But what about the other 1,199? They also attained something, sitting there wondering, "What is the Buddha's speech?" When he held up a flower, no one understood, so they all attained

“Don’t understand—*Don’t know*.” That was their success. Mahakashyapa got the transmission. He got a very hard job! The rest of them got *don’t-know mind*. Who succeeded and who failed?

On a recent visit to China, I went to the temple of the Sixth Patriarch in the south. On my return I reread *The Platform Sutra* of the Sixth Patriarch, which contains the teachings he gave in the town where the temple is located. In the *Platform Sutra* there is the story of a poetry contest. It describes how the Fifth Patriarch, realizing that he was aging, decided to give his robe and bowl, along with succession of the Dharma, to the monk who could write a poem demonstrating true understanding of the essence of mind. When the head monk heard that challenge, he thought to himself, “I know that the other monks are not going to write poems because they assume that I am the best qualified. I wonder whether I should try to write a poem or not. If I don’t write a poem showing my mind to the patriarch, then how will he know whether my understanding is superficial or deep? If I write a poem with the intention of just getting the Dharma, then my motive would be pure. But if, on the other hand, I write the poem trying to get the patriarchy, then I’ll be no different from a common, materialistically-minded person who’s just interested in name and fame. That wouldn’t be good. If, however, I don’t try, how will I get the Dharma?” He thinks about this repeatedly and works himself into an agitated state.

This is an interesting dialogue he has with himself. He questions motive and weighs sincerity of effort. He is very penetrating and honest in asking himself these questions. For most of us, of course, motivation is rarely a pure thing. But from a Zen perspective, there is a difference between purity and clarity. If one has purity, then everything is simple—like white paper. But most of us have mixed, complex motives when we set out to do something. If, at the root of our various complex motives, there is a sense of clear direction about the essential reason we are pursuing something, then our direction and motive are clear, even if not simple. That is an important point in Zen practice: Our sense of direction should always be clear. Even if the motive is not always completely pure and simple, the direction should be, answering the question, “Why do I do this?”

In our story the head monk finally wrote a poem, then went to the patriarch’s room to present it. But when he reached the door, he became agitated and broke out in a sweat. He could not knock on the door and go in. According to the story, he went to the door thirteen times in the course of four days and could not bring himself to go in. Finally the head monk thought to himself, “I’ll go to the corridor in front of the patriarch’s room in the middle of the night, and there I’ll write my poem on the wall. If the patriarch sees it and approves it, I’ll come out, pay homage to him and let him know I wrote this poem. If, on the other hand, he doesn’t approve it, then I’ve wasted years practicing at this temple, getting the respect of all the other monks. What a sorry condition.” At midnight, carrying a candle, he arrived in front of the patriarch’s room and wrote this poem:

The body is the Bodhi Tree [historically, the tree under which Buddha sat and got his enlightenment experience],
the mind is the clear mirror’s stand.
Constantly we should clean them,
so that no dust collects.

After writing the poem on the wall, he returned quickly to his room so no one would see him. He sat, again in a state of agitation, thinking, “I wonder whether the patriarch will find any merit in my poem. If he does, I’m ready to receive the Dharma from him. If he doesn’t, that means that I’m not a good vessel to receive the Dharma because my mind is still clouded and befuddled with bad karma from previous lifetimes.” He sat the whole night like that, without sleeping, wondering what was going to happen.

Now, the patriarch’s room faced an area with three corridors. The patriarch had commissioned an artist from the imperial court to paint the corridors with portraits of the different patriarchs and images representing stories from the Buddhist sutras. In the morning the patriarch came out of his room with the artist and saw the verse on the wall. The patriarch told the artist, “Better to not paint these hallways at all. I’m sorry that I brought you all this way, but the *Diamond Sutra* says all forms are empty, so why put anything on the walls. We should just all look at this verse and pay homage to it.”

The patriarch instructed all the monks to learn this verse, saying that practicing it would help them get enlightenment in the future. But he did not say, “This verse demonstrates the essence of mind.” The verse, you may notice, talks about purification: The body is the Bodhi Tree / the mind is the clear mirror’s stand / Constantly we should clean them / so that no dust collects. That’s not bad. Better than making a mess. But it has the notion of time in it, before and after, impurity moving toward purity—a kind of self-improvement campaign.

At midnight the Fifth Patriarch sent for the head monk and asked, “Did you write the poem?”—knowing full well that he had. He also knew that the head monk had not really attained enlightenment. The head monk said, “Yes, I wrote the poem. I don’t dare seek your patriarchy, but please tell me whether this poem has any merit to it or not.” The patriarch told him, “You have gotten to the door of enlightenment, but you have not gone through.” And he added, “The essence of mind is to be spontaneously realized as something which is before coming and going, cleaning or not cleaning. My suggestion to you is that you return to your room and ponder this more deeply for a few days. If you see into the true nature of your being, then write me another poem and I will transmit the Dharma and the patriarchy to you.” The head monk went back to his room and tried very, very hard to write another poem, based on his intuition. But he just got more and more perturbed and could not produce anything.

Then, we are told, the Sixth Patriarch-to-be had *his* poem written on the wall:

Bodhi has no tree.
Clear mirror has no stand.
Originally nothing.
Where is dust?

He succeeded where the head monk failed. But we should recognize the head monk’s effort and be inspired by his honesty and humility. These qualities are very, very important in pursuing practice.

Failure is, actually, a most important aspect of Zen practice, because when you truly fail, at that moment you stop relating to practice as something that is going to get you somewhere. And even in the midst of your failure, if you continue to practice rather than giving up and throwing the whole thing out the window, then practice becomes your



way of life. In fact, practice *becomes* your life. Practice, itself, just becomes practice, itself. Out of that, the spirit of compassionate activity also is born. Because if you truly embrace what failure is, the heart of kindness begins to emerge. If you cannot face your own failure, then it is difficult to face the failings of anyone else.

Eido Roshi tells a story about a monk whom he once observed in a temple in Japan, whose decorum was impressive in its ordinariness. Roshi watched this monk sweeping the courtyard every day and going about his simple activities. Roshi was taken by the nonspecialness of all this. Finally, he approached the monk, thinking that he must be really advanced in kong-on practice, and asked, "What kong-on do you work on?" The monk replied, "Well, to tell you the truth, all these years I've never passed the first kong-on, 'Mu.'"

We find another inspiring failure in the Christian story of Easter. When Jesus is in the Garden of Gethsemane with all his disciples, he tells them that one of them will betray him that very night, and soldiers will come and arrest him. Peter, his foremost disciple, speaks up and says, "Lord, why cannot I follow thee now? I will lay down my life for thy sake." Jesus answers him, "Verily, verily, I say unto thee, The cock shall not crow, till thou hast denied me thrice."¹⁰ Then the soldiers come. They arrest Jesus and take him to the prison. Peter follows along behind to see what is happening. While he is standing outside the prison, he is asked three times, "Aren't you one of the followers of Jesus of Nazareth?" "I know not the man," he declares. "And immediately the cock crew."¹¹


What follows after the arrest and crucifixion of Jesus is very interesting: Peter goes on to become the successor. He becomes the first pope. Imagine what that must have felt like, to have completely denied knowing your teacher, and then to have the fortitude to be able to carry on his tradition. It is a wonderful example of not being daunted by failure and weakness.

There is one more poem connected with this case. It comes from a later Zen master, who is commenting on the case:

The woman, Manjushri, and Ensnared Light:

*Ultimately how do Zen followers understand?
Only if you harmonize subtly, beyond convention,
Will you believe the waves are basically water.*

—Zen Master Langya¹²

I hope that we all fail miserably and perceive clearly that the waves were never separate from the water. 

1. *Mu Mun Kwan*. Trans. by Zen Master Seung Sahn.. Cumberland, RI: Kwan Um School of Zen, 1983, 49-50
2. *No Barrier*. Trans. by Thomas Cleary. New York: Bantam, 1993, 186
3. *Gateless Barrier*. Trans. by Robert Aitken. San Francisco: North Point, 1991, 257
4. *Gateless Gate*. Trans. by Koun Yamada. Somerville, MA: Wisdom, 2004, 200
5. *Gateless Barrier*. Trans. by Zenkei Shibayama. Trans. into English by Sumiko Kudo. Boston: Shambhala, 2000, 294
6. Seung Sahn, 50
7. Yamada, 203
8. Aitken, 257
9. Shibayama, 294
10. John 13:38
11. Matt. 26:74
12. Cleary, 186