

Hyang Eom's "Up a Tree": Four Teachers' Views

Zen Master Soeng Hyang

It is taught that this kong-an has one only answer that will truly release all the tethers that tie us to our ignorance. Only one response will be universally received as correct: "Aha! 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.

The Temple Rules of the Kwan Um School of Zen say, "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 kong-an practice, tapping into the generosity of those techniques, your mind becomes very spacious.

Even while 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, or 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, 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.

Zen Master Su Bong

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 Man Gong)
Chicken Crowing at 3 a.m.
Moon Setting at 7 a.m.



Photo: Nick Gershberg

Wake up! Wake up!
Spring Sun Shining on Complete World

Zen Master Dae Bong commented:

“What is life? What is death? If you attain that, you are alive.”

Zen Master Bon Shim commented:

“If you don’t hang on to life and you are not troubled by death; you have no hindrance; without hindrance you can stay alive.”

Zen Master Wu Bong

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

The Hua Yen Sutra, which 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. Even though we talk about correct situation, correct relationship and correct function as if they were separate, 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 on 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 from the tree and

also die.” Then if you are in this tree, how do 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 that 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 function naturally 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 neither life nor death. If we can let truth function in our life, then even this kind of 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



Photo: Nick Gershberg

intimate, very alive. Maybe something like that has 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?

Zen Master Wu Kwang

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

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 on to 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; nonattachment; letting go of ideas, conceptions, opinions, frames of reference, and one's orientation toward oneself and the world. If one lets go of it all, one becomes really poor, that is, one has nothing.

There's another story, a favorite of mine, also from the 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 nonstop." 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 weaknesses and yet still again rousing 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. ♦

