

# Cause and Effect Are Clear

Zen Master Bon Hae (Judy Roitman)

In the second case of the *Mumonkan*, an old man appeared whenever Pai Chang gave a dharma talk. Nobody knew who he was; he just appeared, sat in the back, and then left. Every time Pai Chang gave a talk, the old man appeared, sat in the back, and then left.

But one day he stayed behind to talk to Pai Chang. It turns out that an unimaginably long time ago, in fact, several Buddhas ago, he had been the master on the mountain. But when a monk asked him if an enlightened person were subject to cause and effect, he answered no. For this, he had been reborn a fox for five hundred generations.

After telling his story, the old man/fox spirit begged Pai Chang, “Give me one sentence to liberate me from this fox’s body. Tell me, is an enlightened person subject to cause and effect?”

To which Pai Chang answered: “Cause and effect are clear.”



I love this kong-an. It points directly at the cause of so much suffering we inflict on other people: “I am special; whatever I do is correct; I am not subject to cause and effect like other people are.” But Pai Chang says: whoever you are, cause and effect remain clear.

Right now we are inundated with news about Buddhist teachers, Catholic priests, actors, radio hosts, movie moguls, politicians who have hurt so many people. These kinds of actions have gone on ever since humans appeared, often with no visible consequences to the people who hurt others, while the people they hurt carry indelible pain, and often keep silent because what is the point of telling anyone? And of course it is not only famous people who harass, assault, or rape people. And it is not only sexual misbehavior that causes pain to others. We hear about these things and we wonder: how can anyone do a thing like that?

It’s because they think they are exempt.

I don’t know where that monk’s question to the ancient master came from. Was it an academic question about the properties of enlightened beings? Or had he done something he knew was wrong, as we all have, and wanted to

know if enlightenment would give him a way out? But of course it doesn’t. Thousands of people can mourn at your funeral, you can have received uncounted awards and honors, you can have wielded unimaginable power, you can think you got away with whatever it is that you think you got away with. But no one gets away with anything. Whatever we do hangs there in space-time, sending out waves like a pebble dropped in water. We have to own what we do. Otherwise we kill a small part of ourselves, and even if the outside world doesn’t see it, we know a part of us has died.

Luckily, we have good medicine to help us: a great question such as *What am I?* or *What is this?* Look deeply into yourself and you see that you cannot possibly be exempt. *The Lotus Sutra* has an entire chapter (abbreviated in the *Thousand Eyes and Hands Sutra*) about how if you just chant sincerely, Kwan Seum Bosal (aka Kwan Yin Bodhisattva) will save you from a mountain of swords, from the hell of boiling fire, from earth prison hell, from hungry ghosts, asuras, animals, and so on, but everyone knows that ultimately that will fail. As Shylock cried out, “If you prick us, do we not bleed?” Consider the title of Sallie Tisdale’s book: *Advice for Future Corpses*—that’s us, folks, future corpses.

But it doesn’t stop there. We are not just future corpses distinct from each other like so many billiard balls. We are connected so closely that the notion of specialness—of ourselves or of anyone else—is a narrow, ungenerous view of reality, cutting ourselves off at the root.

There’s a line in our chant *Homage to the Three Jewels* that points in the right direction. In Sino-Korean it’s *shi bang sam se je mang char hae*. Word-for-word, it reads: “ten directions three worlds God net shining ocean.” *Ten directions, three worlds* means: throughout time and space. *God net* is Indra’s net, where each being is like a jewel in a many-dimensional matrix, each jewel reflecting all the others, intimately interconnected. And shining ocean is the ocean of great vow—our direction is this great vow, which we make over and over again, vow after vow, to liberate all beings. Reality is vast and transcendent, excluding no one, connecting everyone, like the fingers on a hand are connected.

But understanding these words, or any other words, cannot in itself help us. To what are they pointing? That’s where we need to go. Then, when we start thinking, “Ooh, I am special, I can do this thing that other people aren’t supposed to do,” maybe we can step back and say: actually, no, that’s not the way things work. And when we see someone else barging ahead because they are so special they don’t have to even think about collateral damage to other people, maybe we can say: what you are doing is wrong and has to stop right now. ♦

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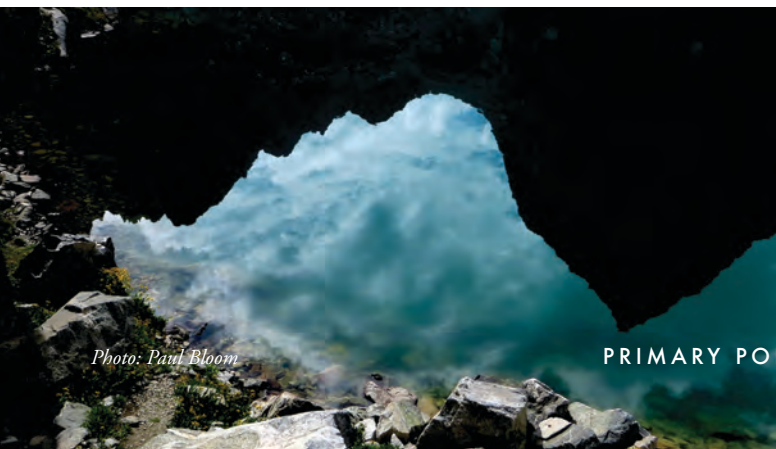


Photo: Paul Bloom