

Gingko

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Outside my local coffee shop in Manhattan stands a magnificent gingko tree that in the fall showers the pavement with golden-colored, fan-shaped leaves. These leaves with radiating veins are said to cure the sickness of forgetting.

The gingko tree species is reputed to be three hundred million years old and, like our roots here, comes out of China. It was nourished by Buddhist monks, who eventually took it to Korea, from whence comes our tradition.

The concept of linear time upon which this world relies so heavily does not account for the fact that time has no real beginning and no end. T. S. Eliot put it this way:

Time present and time past
Are both perhaps present in the future,
And time future contained in time past.

If we see everything in terms of hierarchy then we will see everything as existing separate from us. Thus, through our conceptual understanding, we will see the gingko tree as being completely different from ourselves. But the tree actually exists beyond our conceptual understanding. It exists in that place of equality with all beings.

Just as is said in the Avatamsaka Sutra: “If you wish to understand all buddhas of the past, present, and future, then you should view the nature of the whole universe as being created by mind alone.”

When you sit in meditation the tree has already returned home to its own place. But if you think that the tree is really separate from you—which I admit I often do while I am waiting for my skim latte—then the tree becomes just a concept.

I may see the tree in front of me, and conventionally I may call it a tree. In fact, it could be analyzed into individual molecules and atoms. The tree is simply an accumulation of all these atoms; it does not exist independently of them—and, of course, they do not exist independently of all the rest of the world and the way in which the universe is made up.

Thus we can say that name and form do not exist—they are created by mind alone. So they are empty. Human beings make names and forms for everything, and they—we—believe that these things exist. So we inevitably have suffering when these names and forms change—and when political demigods make outrageous statements.

Zen cuts all the mental constructs out from under you and you’ve got nothing, and in that nothing—emptiness—is profound wisdom. No meaning is profound meaning.

Everything is both form and emptiness. The tree is form, and emptiness is the fact that it does not exist in itself but

is only in an arrangement of constantly changing atoms. Neither exists without the other.

Near the beginning of my practice one statement, made by Huang Po, struck me and has stayed with me:

Men [and presumably women] are afraid to forget their minds, fearing to fall through the Void with nothing to stay their fall. They do not know that the Void is not really void, but the realm of the Dharma.

Zen Master Kosho Uchiyama spoke about meditative knowledge and daily living when he said, “We open the hand of thought and let all thoughts come and go freely.”

The process of opening, Uchiyama explained, is the



state of “No gaining, no knowing,” a state in which the mind is compared to an expansive sky that does not hinder floating clouds.

Tseng Ts’an, the Third Patriarch of Zen, put it more trenchantly:

Likes and dislikes
Are the mind’s disease.
If you miss the deep meaning,
It is useless to still your thoughts.

It is clear as vast space,
Nothing missing, nothing extra.
If you choose or reject,
You cannot see things as they are.

Outside, don’t get tangled in things
Inside, don’t get lost in emptiness.

Be still and become One,
And the confusion stops by itself.*

A little more than a hundred years ago in Korea there was a big ceremony at a monks' college. According to tradition, the senior monk ascended the high rostrum to deliver the commencement speech. After sitting down and adjusting his ceremonial robes, the senior monk said, "You must continue to study correctly and become like great trees, from which temples are built, and like large bowls, able to hold many good things. An ancient poet once wrote, 'Water takes the shape of its vessel. Human beings conform to the company they keep.' So today you are all graduating. That is very wonderful. If from now on you make friends with good and virtuous people, you will naturally become good and virtuous and fulfill your greatest obligation to heaven. But if you associate with bad people who follow a bad way, you will eventually become bad. Always keep the Buddha in mind and only keep good company. Then you will become like great trees and containers of the Dharma. This is my parting advice to you."

Just then the senior monk caught sight of a strange-looking figure sitting off to the side. Although his clothes were in tatters and his hair and beard were long, this monk was an imposing figure among the neat, shaven-headed monks. His appearance might seem unkempt but his eyes shone like diamonds. In fact, he was none other than Zen Master Kyong Ho (whose portrait is usually hung in our centers). He was already recognized in Korea as a great Zen master.

The commencement speaker asked him, "Please, Zen Master, give us a word."

Without looking up, Kyong Ho only shook his head. "No, no. I am only a wanderer, passing through. I have nothing to say."

But the senior monk persisted until Kyong Ho ascended the high rostrum.

Kyong Ho said, "All of you are monks. Monks are free of personal attachments and live only to serve all beings. Wanting to become a great tree or container of Dharma will prevent you from being a true teacher. Great trees have great uses, small trees have small uses. Good and bad bowls can all be used in their own way. None are to be discarded. Rather, you must become great carpenters. If you are a good carpenter, you never throw away big trees, or small trees, or good trees, or bad trees. A skilled carpenter can use any tree in his work. He never discards a single thing. Good and bad do not matter. If good things come, you must know their proper use; if bad things come, you must also know how to use them correctly. Don't attach to the good or push away the bad. You must use good and bad and make them correct. So keep good and bad friends, and never reject anything. This is true Buddhism. My only wish for you is that you free yourselves from all discriminating thoughts."

Goethe might have benefited from this advice (and so

might I have while waiting for my coffee) before he wrote his poem for his amour about the leaf of the Gingko:

This leaf from a tree in the East,
Has been given to my garden.
It reveals a certain secret . . .
Does it represent One living creature
Which has divided itself?

Or are these Two, which have divided
That should be One?
To reply to such a Question,
I have found the right answer:

Do you notice in my songs and verses
That I am One and Two?

Zen Master Man Gong, Zen Master Seung Sahn's grand-teacher, whose portrait also usually hangs in our centers, said:

Everything is impermanent, but there is truth,
You and I are not two, not one:
Only your stupid mind is non-stop.
Already alive in the Prajna ship.
[*Prajna means wisdom.*]

To which Zen Master Seung Sahn commented, "What do you see now, what do you hear now? Everything appears clearly in front of you."

"Already alive in the Prajna ship. What does this mean?"

You might agree with what Ta Hui, who lived in China in the ninth century, wrote in his letters and lectures known as *Swampland Flowers* (Shambhala, 1977; if I had the resources I would give a copy to everyone in Washington!) that this essencelessness "shines in the daily activities of everyone, appearing in everything. Though you try to grasp it, you cannot get it; though you try to abandon it, it always remains. It is vast and unobstructed, utterly empty."

Only, don't know!

Congratulations to each of you for being on board the Prajna ship. ♦

*The translation of the "Hsin Shin Ming" (Trust in Mind) is by Zen Master Hae Kwang.

John Holland is a long-time member of the Chogye International Center of New York. After training in the New Haven Zen Center, he became a dharma teacher in 1995. In 2008 he took the vows of a bodhisattva teacher. John has taught meditation at Union Theological Seminary of New York, Columbia University, and for extended periods at the Institute of Omega for Holistic Studies, as well as at New York Chogyesa. For many years he was an active member of the Buddhist Council of New York. John was the coeditor of *Don't-Know Mind: The Spirit of Korean Zen* and *Elegant Failure: A Guide to Zen Koans*, both by Zen Master Wu Kwang. In addition to Zen, John also practices tai chi and bird-watching.