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BLUE CLIFF RECORD, CASE NO. 3

This is the third case of the Blue Cliff Record, "Master Ma is Ill."

Introduction

One device, one object, one word, one phrase. The intent is that you'll have a place to enter. Still this is gouging a wound in healthy flesh that can become a nest or a den. The great function appears without abiding and fixed principles. The intent is that you'll realize that there is something transcendent that colors the sky and covers the earth, yet it cannot be grasped. This way will do; not this way will do, too. This is too diffuse. This way won't do; not this way won't do either. This is too cut off. Without treading these two paths, what would be right? Please test that sightless view to see.

The Case

Great Master Ma was sick.

The temple superintendent asked him: Teacher, how is your venerable health these days.

The Great Master said: Sun face buddha; moon face buddha.

There is a poem that goes with this case, too:

Sun face buddha; moon face buddha.
What kind of people were the ancient emperors?
For twenty years I have suffered bitterly.
How many times have I gone down to the blue dragon's cave
for you?
This distress is worth recounting.
Clear-eyed students of the way should not take it lightly.

Please sit comfortably.

This old story tells us how the great teachers used every opportunity to serve us and to teach. Ma-tsu, actually, was dying and he died, I think, a few days after this interchange. But he immediately met the student's question with an amazing saying: 'How are you doing? How are you feeling?' 'Sun face buddha; moon face buddha.' The story is that the sun face buddha lives 1800 years, and the moon face buddha lives for a night and a day. It's a legend from an old sutra.

Ma-tsu was one of the great early masters of zen in China. He lived through the eighth century for about seventy years. He lived from 709 to 788. There's an interesting story of himself. He studied with Nan-yueh, who was a student of the sixth ancestral teacher. He's in the Rinzai line. Most of the teachers up until his time had one student who carried on the way, or maybe two. He had 139 enlightened successors by all

accounts. Maybe they varied some in quality, but still quite an impressive number. When he went to study with his teacher, whenever he had free time he would go into the zendo and meditate. People still do this today, of course. Somebody noticed this and drew it to the attention of his teacher Nan-yueh. So he went down and questioned him and said:

Oh, great one what are you aiming at by sitting there in meditation like that? What do you want?

Ma-tsu said: I want to become a buddha.

The teacher then picked up a ceramic tile and began to rub it on a rock very vigorously in the dojo, right there. This got the student's attention and Ma-tsu asked him:

What are you doing?

He said: I'm polishing it to make it into a mirror. (Old Chinese mirrors were usually metal, bronze. They were very highly polished bronze. It would be very hard to polish a tile into a mirror.)

Ma-tsu said: How can you make a mirror by polishing a tile?

The teacher said: Granted, rubbing a tile will not make a mirror. How can a sitting meditation make a buddha?

Ma-tsu said: Then what would be right?

The teacher said: It's like the case of an ox pulling a cart. If the cart does not go, should you hit the cart or should you hit the ox?

Ma-tsu couldn't say anything.

The teacher went on to say: Do you think you are practicing sitting meditation or do you think you are practicing sitting buddhahood? If you are practicing sitting meditation, meditation is not sitting or lying. If you are practicing buddhahood, buddha is not a fixed form. In the midst of everything that is changing you should neither hold on nor push away. If you keep the buddha seated, this is murdering the buddha. If you cling to the form of sitting, this is not attaining its inner principle.

Ma-tsu heard this teaching as if he were drinking ambrosia.

He bowed and asked: How should I concentrate so as to merge with formless absorption so as to become utterly one with my meditation?

The teacher said: Your study of the mind ground is like planting seeds. My expounding of the essence of reality is like the moisture in the sky. Circumstances are good for you, so you will see the way. (He was right, too.)

If the way is not color or form, how can I see it?

The reality eye of the mind ground can see the way. Formless absorption is also like this.

Ma-tsu kept asking. (He had access to his teacher so he kept going, kept pushing.)

Is there becoming and decay, or not? (Do things come into existence and fall away, the way symptom (???), or not?)

One sees the way as becoming and decaying, compounding and scattering. That is not really seeing the way. Listen to my verse.

Mind ground contains various seeds.
When there is moisture, all of them sprout.
The flower absorption has no form.
What decays and what becomes?

When Ma-tsu heard this his understanding opened. His heart and mind were clear. He served his teacher for ten years day by day going deeper into the matter.

This meeting took place in the 730's of our era. A few years ago. A few years before we were born. Ma-tsu was one of the greatest teachers. Nan-chuan, who was Chao-Chou's teacher, was his student and Pai-chang, who was Huang-po's teacher, was his student, too. Many of the great people studied with him.

So he comes tottering out into the courtyard and the temple superintendent, (I think he was an accountant, actually, who kept the temple books), said: How is your health? How is your venerable health? He's asked him very courteously because Ma-tsu was old and revered. Not so old for a zen teacher, really, he was in his seventies. He says: Sun face buddha; moon face buddha.

Just before he died it was arranged for Yasutani Roshi to hold a Jukai ceremony. Many people who had wanted to take Jukai with him for some time and hadn't come to the assembly, including Aitken Roshi and Anne Aitken. Yasutani Roshi was very sick and Yamada Roshi asked him: How are you doing? He said: Yesterday it was very hard to breathe, but today I'm doing a little better. He came and did the Jukai ceremony and then he went off to stay with his sister and a few days later he died. At his memorial service, at the service for his death, Yamada Roshi gave a teisho on this case. Sun face buddha; moon face buddha. How is your health these days? Yesterday I was very short of breath, but today I'm doing a little better.

Ma-tsu, whether he was sick or well, was not in itself a very disturbing thing. He was grounded in this present moment. Just as we all are the minute we come home. If you are not grounded in this present moment, then it is a very hard thing and you suffer. If we are not grounded like this, the mind chases around after a thousand things and when we get sick, it is a great misfortune. We keep longing for something that we cannot have. But even if you get well, if your mind chases around like this, it is also a great misfortune and you keep longing for something you cannot have. No human state is constant. (author's name ???), whose great guided tour of hell, his memoir of Auschwitz, says that it is well known that complete happiness is not possible for human beings because there is always the thought of losing whatever we have. And he said few people follow it further to see that absolute unhappiness is also not possible because there is always something to worry about that pushes out even extreme unhappiness. Suffering pushes out previous suffering. The desire for food pushes out grief. Things like

that. So if you want to be free of being pulled around like this, it is not easy but it is possible and it is a great thing to do.

You can tell that when Ma-tsu studied with his teacher, he worked very hard at his meditation and he was eager in questioning. He really wanted to understand. His teacher told him how to become absorbed in this moment and in his koan. That is what we must do today.

His teacher taught him, also, not to rely too much on technique. Anything you cling to sooner or later will change. Anybody who has sat this far in sesshin has found this. You just find a method that really works and then you sit down after the next kinhin and it doesn't work any more. How amazing! What is wrong? If you want to be free the way he was, then you have to not cling to any particular method, but you do your best. Method is always something that is sort of coupled together. It is like a stick that props up a fence that somebody hasn't managed to really fix up. Sooner or later the fence will fall down, but that's okay. We use method and try to become one with our circumstances right where we are. There's really no other choice in life that has any opening to it. All other ways lead to death and darkness. We may take a bit of a detour on the way there, but that's only human (???). So if you want to find life and light, there is no other way than by entering circumstances. You will find that you're always separated from your meditation and you have to find, by any means you can, a way to become one with it. And when you become one with it, the whole world will change. The distance between heaven and earth is just that. Turn--a 360 degree turn.

It is said that before you do zazen the trees are trees, the hills are hills, and the rivers are rivers. Halfway through your practice the trees are not trees and the hills are not hills and the rivers are not rivers. This is the moment when you really get taken up into your meditation and you see that there is no basis for anything. All the things that we thought were substantial are not. They all come out of our own hearts. But then, fortunately, practice continues and we find that trees are trees and rivers are rivers again. Hills are hills. Everything is changed by that magical transformation of awareness. The great magic in life is awareness and attention. There is nothing else as powerful and nothing else as revealing as giving our attention to what we are doing. Finally, the green shifts of light (sheaves of life???) come. Then everything you do will sing and you will hear the trees singing and you will see the hills walking.

It's important to continue using each thing that comes up. HAH!! Each thing that arises. Just enter it right here and everything will be changed.

Please keep up your zazen.

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