

Once the Emperor of China summoned the national teacher Chung and asked him, “Master, what can I do to honor your memory after you’re gone?” The master said, “Build me a seamless monument.” The Emperor asked, “What would such a monument look like?” The master stood in silence for a long time, then asked the Emperor, “Do you understand?” The Emperor said, “I do not understand.” The master said, “I have explained this teaching to a disciple of mine, Tan-yuan. You can ask him.” Not long after, the master—in fact—died.

So the Emperor called in Tan-yuan, told him the story of what had gone on, and asked him to explain. Tan-yuan said, “South of Shou, north of Tan there’s gold enough for the entire country. Under a shadowless tree is tied up a communal ferryboat. Up in a crystal palace, there’s no one who knows.” It’s not recorded, whether or not the Emperor understood that one.

This koan is asking us in a way to consider what does our life add up to? What does our practice add up to? What do we have to show for it all? The master asks for a seamless monument—a traditional Buddhist memorial. A stupa has layers that represent earth, water, fire, air, and buddhanature. The whole iconography of these things I’m sure you can look up. The idea is that they represent all the parts of the world. What would it mean to have a monument that has no parts? Rather, it’s seamless and something that’s not made up of separate parts.

For me, this is a good image of taking our life whole; of not separating it out into the good and bad parts, saying “I want to have only the good remembered and the bad parts we can bury over there.” What I think is very useful about this old story is you get two masters giving two very different answers. This is unusual because there are a lot of cases where a student doesn’t get the answer the first time and he goes to another teacher. Usually what happens is the teacher gives him the same answer, and he’s just got to deal with it.

But here you get a completely different answer. It’s interesting to see it from two different perspectives. The first time around, the national teacher simply stands in silence. Almost everyone, if the story stopped there, would think that the silence is the seamless monument. It’s a very tempting interpretation. If you want seamlessness you have void, emptiness and silence. What could be a better representation of seamlessness than pure silence? This is one of the great pitfalls of our practice—to interpret that silence as the inner state that we’re trying to achieve. That this will be what we finally add up to. What we finally achieve is that kind of emptiness—of no intrusive thoughts, dwelling only in this beautiful silence.

Another old master commenting on this case said, “Dragons do not live in stagnant water.” That silence can be stagnant, not alive. The danger in our practice is that we do something to ourselves that is stagnant in the name of becoming peaceful. We think that

what we’re supposed to do is dampen down or quiet down everything that’s going on inside until we achieve this perfect flatline state.

Well, fortunately the Emperor gets another chance and we get another chance with him because he asked Tan-yuan the disciple. Tan-yuan gives him a very elaborate answer. Even if you don’t understand anything of what the answer means, you can see that it’s full of detail, metaphor and symbolism. Structurally, it’s the opposite of silence. When he says South of Sho and North of Tan, basically he’s describing the whole country. A shadowless tree obscures nothing and hides nothing. A communal ferryboat has room for everybody in it. The crystal palace—crystal is completely transparent. Nobody knows.

It’s the idea that nothing is divided into knowing and not knowing. But, in a sense, that doesn’t matter so much. If you just heard this story and saw: instead of silence, you’re getting complicated detail. Instead of something you think you can understand, you’re getting something you don’t understand at all. That not understanding is also part of this seamless monument. Who says that the seamless monument should only include the parts you understand? We can include everything.

This is what we’re talking about with taking life whole. The silence of the original master is not supposed to be some narrow self-state of serenity. It’s more like the silence that’s a perfectly clean window looking out onto the whole countryside. You look through that silence and you see the whole world. The second teacher metaphorically describes that whole world, and spells it out in a certain way for the Emperor.

When we start out and begin instruction, I tell people, “just look in the mirror and see your face in the mirror.” Everybody gets preoccupied with their face when they look in the mirror, but that’s not the only thing that’s in the mirror. The whole room is in the mirror. You may have a window in that room looking out into the whole world. The mirror actually reflects everything. We tend to focus in on one piece of it. So we look in the mirror and say, this is me—not just our face but everything. The whole background is me, too.

When we begin to practice we always have some idea of who we’re trying to be. We think that practice is going to actualize that. When you get to the end of decades of practice, it’s not so much that you finally have turned yourself into that, or that you’ve made it. It’s much more that you are really able to tolerate being the person you were on day one. You’re able to accept who you’ve been all along—not that you’ve finally turned yourself into the ideal that you’ve been chasing.

As some of you know, I’m also a psychoanalyst. In traditional psychoanalysis, Freud would instruct his patients to say whatever comes to mind. That was the only instruction he gave them—just say whatever comes to mind. So people proceeded to lie and deny, tell stories, and present themselves in a good or bad light. Everything that came out was some kind of organized narrative of self-aggrandizement or self-effacement—the denial

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or repression. That simple instruction—to just say whatever comes to mind—is the hardest thing in the world to do. After many, many years of analysis, if you can actually follow that beginning instruction, the analysis is over. That’s the criteria you could say—just letting yourself be yourself, moment after moment after moment.

It’s the same thing in our Zen practice. We think we’re turning ourselves into something else, into something special, but we’re just here to be ourselves.

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