

Zhaozhou's "CYPRESS TREE"

Cypress tree in the yard, the wind-blown flag on the pole—it's like one bespeaking a boundless spring, like one drop telling of the water of the ocean. The ancient Buddhas, born periodically, go far beyond the ordinary current, not falling into words and thought. How can you understand verbally?

Case

A monk asked Zhaozhou, "What is the living meaning of Chan Buddhism?" Zhaozhou said, "The cypress tree in the yard."

Commentary

One day Zhaozhou got up in the hall and said, "This matter clearly cannot be got out of, even by immeasurably great men. When I went to Guishan, a monk asked what the living meaning of Chan is, and Guishan asked him to bring him a seat. If one would be a real teacher of the source, one must use the basic thing to deal with people." A monk then asked Zhaozhou what the living meaning of Chan Buddhism is; Zhaozhou said, "The cypress tree in the yard." The monk said, "Teacher, don't use an object to guide people." The master Zhaozhou said, "I'm not using an object to guide anyone." The monk said, "Then what's the meaning of Chan Buddhism?" Zhaozhou said, "The cypress tree in the yard."

Chan Master Huijiao went to Fayan's place; Fayan asked, "Where have you recently come from?" Huijiao said, "Zhaozhou." Fayan said, "I hear Zhaozhou has a saying, 'The cypress tree in the yard'—is it so?" Huijiao said, "No." Fayan said, "Everyone who's been around says a monk asked him about the meaning of Chan and Zhaozhou said, 'The cypress tree in the yard' how can you say no?" Huijiao said, "The late master didn't say this; please don't slander him." Everywhere Huijiao was called Iron Beak Jiao.

Master Shengmo used to have people go through this story first. to clear away their intellectual views; he once said, "The three mysteries and five ranks are all within within it." Chan Master Zhenru Fang awakened to this story and went right into the abbot's room to see Chan Master Langya Guangzhao Jiao. Guangzhao asked, "How do you understand it?" Zhenru

said, "All night the bed mat's warm—as soon as you awaken, dawn has come." Guangzhao approved. Zhenru's realization of the story was excellent. Tiantong's versification of this story is not bad either.

Verse:

The bank-eyebrows lined with snow,
The river-eyes contain autumn;
The ocean-mouth drums waves,
The boat-tongue rides the current:
The ability to quell disorder,
The strategy for great peace—
Old Zhaozhou, old Zhaozhou:
Stirring up the monasteries, never yet stopping.
Uselessly expending effort, still the cart is made to fit the groove:
Originally without ability, still it fills the ravines and gullies.

Verse Commentary

Over fourteen hundred months old, he's been through a lot of things; that's why his 'bank-eyebrows are lined with snow.' A man of ancient times represented eyebrows and eyes as crags and lightning; Tiantong using 'river eyes' and 'ocean mouth,' makes a four-line verse—it is like seeing the living Zhaozhou pointing to the cypress tree. His eyebrow are like banks covered with white reed flowers; his eyes are like the blue of autumn water. An ancient verse says, "The rivers in the countryside are clearer than the blue of a monk's eye; the distant mountains are dark as the indigo of Buddha's head."

"The ocean-mouth drums waves, the boat-tongue rides the current—waves can overturn a boat, a boat can ride the waves; one word can destroy a nation, one word can create a nation. Therefore next he uses a technique for quelling disorder and a formula for great peace. Zhaozhou once said, "Sometimes I take a blade of grass and use it as the sixteen-foot golden body; sometimes I take the sixteen-foot golden body and use it as a blade of grass." This saying originally solved someone's doubts, but now how many people have doubts about it! Did Zhaozhou want to stir up the monasteries?!

People see Zhaozhou's answer, responding immediately as the question is voiced, as if not needing effort—only Tiantong knows how he traveled for eighty years with the resolution to study from anyone who was better than him, even be it a three-year-old child; this was work done in free time, put to use in a busy time. Unless you're someone who has suffered hardship, you won't know that "The lying wheel has talent—it can cut off a hundred thoughts. Confronting situations, mind is not aroused; day by day enlightenment grows." The Sixth Patriarch said, "I have no talent, I don't cut off the hundred thoughts. Confronting situations, mind is repeatedly aroused—how can enlightenment grow?" When you look at it in this way, what about that which fills the ravines and gullies? Now it is thrown into West Lake. The clear wind of unburdening—to whom is it imparted?

Adding Sayings

A monk asked Zhaozhou, "What is the living meaning of Chan Buddhism?"—Much involvement in idle concern.

Zhaozhou said, "The cypress tree in the yard."—Fired brick strikes solid ice.

The bank-eyebrows lined with snow—Eating salt as much as rice.

The river-eyes contain autumn—Hard to fool one bit.

The ocean-mouth drums waves—If there's a verbal expression, it's not the fundamental message.

The boat-tongue rides the current—Without words, cutting off holy and ordinary.

The ability to quell disorder—This is the cypress tree.

The strategy for great peace—This is the cypress tree too.

Old Zhaozhou, old Zhaozhou—Why don't you answer?

Stirring up the monasteries, never yet stopping—Tiantong is number two.

Uselessly expending effort, still the cart is made to fit the groove—Bringing it forth, he uses it fittingly.

Originally without ability, still it fills the ravines and gullies—Buying all the current fashions without putting down any money.