

BUDDHA TWIRLS A FLOWER

In ancient times, at the assembly on Vulture Peak, Buddha picked up a flower and showed it to the crowd.

Everyone was silent, except for the Kashyapa, who broke out in a smile.

Buddha said, "I have the treasury of the eye of truth, the ineffable mind of nirvana, the most subtle of teachings on the formlessness of the form of reality. It is not defined in words, but is specially transmitted outside of doctrine. I entrust it to Kashyapa the Elder."

There are several Chinese stories of the Buddha holding up a flower so people used to think that this story was true. Today it is generally believed that this story is a fabrication. Frankly, it never occurred to me to ask whether this or any of the hundreds of stories about the Buddha actually happened. The point for me has always been, does this story illustrate something about my life. Does it illuminate some part of myself that is too deep to be reached by the ordinary light of the world?

In The Lotus Sutra, it says that "the meeting at Mt. Grdhrakuta is definitely present here." This means that that Buddha's twirling a flower is happening right now, in front of us. Literally, this story has a presence that transcends all limitations of time and space. It may not be historically true, but it eloquently conveys the truth of Zen and how it has been transmitted through the generations to us. There is no mention of this story in any of the sutras, however, Mahakashyapa is frequently referred to as one of the Buddha's main disciples who was responsible for leading the sangha after the Buddha's passing into Paranirvana.

Vulture Peak was a setting for some of the Buddha's most important teachings, especially The Lotus Sutra, upon which this koan is based. In this sutra, we are taught that *samsara*—the day-to-day world of birth and death, the arising and passing away of everything within and without us—is identical to *nirvana*, which literally means extinction, connotes the unconditioned state beyond birth and death. In a practical sense, it denotes the extinction of all delusions.

In the Lotus Sutra, Buddha reveals that *nirvana* is not some special state to be attained in the future after long, arduous practice. No, nirvana is the real nature of things. *Nirvana is samsara*. That is, there is no duality between the phenomenal and the absolute. In western language you might say that Nirvana is the realization of Samsara.

This unity is realized in the experience of suchness, here illustrated by the Buddha holding up a flower. One has to experience nirvana, the complete extinction of our distorted thoughts and feelings, before one can see the world as it is.

“The Jewel Mirror Samadhi,” written by Dongshan, the founder of Soto Zen, is primarily concerned with suchness and its transmission. It begins, *The teaching of suchness is intimately transmitted by buddhas and ancestors. Now you have it; preserve it well.* The reality of suchness is not something that needs to be calculated or acquired. It is already present, but needs to be personally discerned, realized, expressed, and maintained. Towards the end of the poem it says, *The wooden man starts to sing; the stone woman gets up dancing.* This echoes many traditional Chan/ Zen images of life arising from stillness, the revival of spirit promoted by Samadhi practice, such “the plum blossoms on a dead branch.” In our story, it is Kashyapa’s smile!

Known in Sanskrit as *tathata*, this suchness is described in Indian Buddhism as ultimate truth, reality, the source, or the unattainable. In Zen stories, Tathata is often best revealed in the seemingly mundane or meaningless, such as noticing the way the wind blows through a field of grass, or watching someone's face light up as they smile. We are told that without mediation, without any technique, or without any kind of gradual journey to a particular destination, we need to take the backward step, so that we are immediately, without mediation, right at that moment. We see the sun set over the ocean and we are that sunset—we are immediately suchness - Buddha - things as they are-life as it is. It's immediate. It's not gradual. It's not depending on various means that mediate the experience. It's radically just what we are.

It is so immediate, so at the cutting edge of the newness of the moment that it is beyond words of any kind. It is the silence behind, or perhaps I should say before, all things. When Buddha picks up a flower he is demonstrating suchness, the immediate reality of what is. He is showing us who we are. When Buddha picks up a flower he is using skillful means. According to the doctrine of upaya, or skillful means, there is no particular fixed means of awakening. Methods or even expressions of the truth are always provisional and limited in scope and may be abandoned or rejected in one’s search for the truth. Everything is potentially a means of awakening: a sunset, a piece of food, a conversation with a homeless person, Buddha twirling a flower. Everything in our life can be a means of awakening. There is nothing outside of our practice.

Imagine a crowd of very serious women and men in the posture of meditation. Many of them had made long trips through treacherous terrain to see this great teacher, hoping to get some words of wisdom to direct their lives. It was a once in a lifetime event. But the teacher didn't speak. Perhaps he smiled. He just picked up a flower and twirled it. A flower is beautiful, but it is very fragile. In a sense, its beauty is enhanced by its fragility and impermanence. We may not be alert enough to the beauty and fragility of each passing moment, but all of us have picked a beautiful rose or tulip, only to watch it fade and decay within a very short period of time. Only Kashyapa was free enough of all expectations and conclusions, so that he could see exactly what the Buddha was teaching.

In a commentary on this case, it says that Mahakashyapa and Buddha smiled one smile. They were in perfect accord. They were not in close relationship—it was more immediate than that—because there was no self and other. Buddha picking up a flower is suchness, the smile of Kashyapa and Buddha is also suchness. One can imagine that if they started to talk about what had just happened the immediacy of the moment would've have been lost.

Finally, we come to what I think is one of the most essential features of Zen: the hand to hand, mind to mind, transmission of the truth outside the scriptures, outside of all words and letters. An important saying of the Lotus Sutra is that suchness is revealed “By a Buddha and a Buddha.” A Buddha alone cannot realize it; only a Buddha and a Buddha can! When a Buddha and a Buddha meet, there are no separate buddhas; there are only points of meeting. Nothing is separate. There is only being, which is compassion and love and sharing. How wonderful!

This shared experience between the Buddha and Mahakashyapa is the transmission of truth, of the authority of reality itself. Suchness is the only authority. There is no secret, esoteric teaching to transmit. It is just the shared experience of life as it is—without anything extra added. Life is always revealing itself just as it is, but it is only when we are awake enough to see this, that we receive transmission.

Dogen frequently points out that this transmission only occurs from Buddha to Buddha. If we do not receive it with our buddha-mind, we do not receive it at all. Zen expression comes from buddha-mind and goes to buddha-mind. Buddha expresses Buddha, and thereby realizes Buddha. Buddha awakens Buddha. One meaning of “Buddha” is “awake.” We can say, *Buddha Buddhas Buddha*. If all this talk about

Buddhas and Buddhas seems a bit removed from our lives we might consider Homeless Kodo's statement that "to practice zazen is to do self by the self with the self." When a noun becomes a verb it loses any sense of its having an individual substance apart from everything else. It becomes movement just as Samadhi is better translated as enlightened activity rather than enlightenment. In a sense we all have to become verbs—not in the past or completed sense nor in the future *what if* sense, but in the present tense. We are not a thing, we are a process. As Dogen said in the Genjo Koan, *Buddhas keep on becoming Buddhas.*

In a way there is really nothing more to say. Now *you have it; please keep it well.*