

SOANKA: SONG OF THE GRASS HUT

Soanka, The Song of the Grass Hut was written by Shitou(700-793BCE) during the time when Zen was first becoming popular in China as a practice of directly experiencing reality in seated meditation. The poem is a Buddhist expression of the Taoist archetype of the *mountain sage*, who forsakes ordinary social conventions for the solitary, spiritual life. As a result of the establishment of large Chan monasteries, this kind of solitary life in the mountain wilderness had almost disappeared in China by the time that Shitou moved to the South Peak Temple on South Mountain and built a hut on a large stone ledge. Apart from Han Shan's Cold Mountain Poems, this enthusiasm for a do-it-alone lifestyle is unique in Buddhist literature.

Taken literally, this poem represents a kind of life that none of us in this room has chosen to lead. We have come to Zen not as a way to find a way out of the busyness of our lives but rather to remain in contact with "the one who is not busy" as we go about our day-to-day lives in the City. And yet this poem has a lot to offer anyone who is interested in finding a way to make contact with the deepest part of themselves. Over the years, I have noticed how the imagery of this poem has remained alive and has acted as a catalyst to intensify my practice.

The poem is an expression of the Sixth Patriarch's idea that the real teacher resides within oneself and not necessarily within the walls of a monastery. It is an acknowledgement of the "mind is Buddha" teaching popularized by the Patriarch's Platform Sutra and the teachings of Mazu, another popular 8th Century Chan Master. He said, *We concentrate on actualizing Buddha's insight, not on making progress in meditation... the mind is the Buddha. Buddha and common people, enlightenment and delusion have different names, but they have the same origin. Study your minds first!*

While Shitou may have lived in a hut on a large stone on a mountain it is most helpful to consider the poem's imagery as a metaphor for creating and developing the inner space that supports *just sitting*. That is, we need to see how to build our own "inner hut" for our inner teacher, our original nature. As we go through the poem it will be very helpful to keep these ideas in mind.

I've built a grass hut where there's nothing of value.

Although I said that we should consider building a hut as a metaphor, it can be taken quite literally as well. I often tell people who are just beginning a practice that it is helpful to create a special space just for meditation. This is possible even if you live in just one room. When I began my sitting practice I was a graduate student living in a small, studio apartment. Each morning, I would move my wooden chair away from the desk to a window that looked out at a brick wall. On the window sill I kept a small, two inch Buddha. That was very humble, but it served to keep a physical space in my life as a reminder of the kind of life I was trying to live. It wasn't much, it had "no value" from a material point of view, but it was infinitely valuable to me. Eventually, everything we encounter may serve as a reminder for the kind of life we have chosen to lead, but in the beginning it is especially important to create a reminder in "a small corner" of your life.

After eating, I relax and enjoy a nap.

Here the life of a master is described as nothing special. When he is hungry, he eats and when he is tired he naps. How many of us can live that simply? How many of us know exactly what it is that we need from moment to moment? Often we are too distracted by things to know exactly what our mind and body need. Think about how different our life would be if we were able to live like this.

When it was completed, fresh weeds appeared.

Now it's been lived in—covered by weeds.

The person in the hut lives here calmly,

Not stuck to inside, outside or in-between

Shitou describes how intimately our practice life must engage with the rest of our lives. We should not separate what we do on our pillows in the morning from what we do at our jobs in the afternoon. No matter where we are and no matter what we do, we must inhabit the inner space of our practice. There is no duality of any kind. There is no inside or outside, here or there, self or other. As we've said many times, our practice is about experiencing the deep interconnectedness of all things.

**Places worldly people live, he doesn't live.
Realms worldly people love, she doesn't love.**

This is a simple way of putting the Mahayana idea of avoiding the Eight worldly dharmas:

1. **Getting what you want**
2. **Avoiding getting what you do not want**
3. **Wanting happiness,**
4. **Not wanting unhappiness**
5. **Wanting fame**
6. **Not wanting to be unknown**
7. **Wanting praise**
8. **Not wanting blame.**

It's not a matter of giving up things. It is about learning to live a life that supports our wish to work on ourselves for the sake of all sentient beings. Worldly people live for their own happiness, but we are living for the enlightenment of all beings, everywhere.

**Though the hut is small, it includes the entire world.
In ten feet square, an old man illumines forms and their nature.**

Our practice is about experiencing our original nature, which includes all things. Our true self is boundless and unlimited and is fundamentally interconnected with all things. We see the entire universe in ourselves. We see eternity in each moment and experience heaven and earth in each breath. And so we do not need to build large temples with Golden Buddhas to practice. The inner space that we enter in our sittings is ten feet square; it is boundless and thus large enough to contain everything.

**Just Sitting, with head covered all things are at rest.
Thus, this mountain monk doesn't understand at all.**

We do not need to get or develop insights or understanding. This is a practice of non-attainment. Just sitting is the subtle activity of allowing things to rest just the way they are. In another story, Shitou was asked by one of his students the essential meaning of Buddha-dharma.

He replied, "No gaining, no knowing."

The student asked again, “Can you say anything further?”

Shitou answered, “The expansive sky does not obstruct the floating white clouds.”

...Turn the light to shine within, then just return.

The vast inconceivable source can't be faced or turned away from.

. This idea was re-emphasized by Dogen in *The Fukanzazengi* in which he tells us *to take the backward step and shine the light within*. We need to let go of our chasing after external things and return to presence. Each moment we need to let go of everything that arises and return to the depths of our original nature. And when we sit we step back into the immenseness of our life beneath all its distractions. Moment after moment we experience the truth of presence. When we let go of all of our attachments and worries, our true, inconceivable nature appears. In our practice of sitting and everyday conduct we return not only to the source of ourselves, but also to the world around us. We let go of our body and mind to embody a wholehearted, active, responsive presence to everything. This is the heart of Soto Zen.

**If you want to know the undying person in the hut,
Don't separate from this skin bag here and now.**

If we want to make contact with our True Self, the Original master of the grass hut, we need wholeheartedly to embody our life, our body and mind, skin and bones. Our practice is quite simply about realizing the reality of this mind and body, right here, right now. What could be simpler? What could be more demanding?