

Chung Tai Koans

Teaching Stories of Grand Master Wei Chueh

■ Personal Merits and Group Achievement

When building the Lin Quan Chan Monastery, the lack of funds made it difficult sometimes to hire workers. Early one morning, the monks gathered silently and decided to go out and solicit alms. When the Master found out, he said compassionately, “There is no need to do this. It will be okay.”

But late at night while everyone else was asleep, one person was working silently at the construction site. When one of the monks heard the noise and went to check, he found that it was the Master.

On another day, a monk found that the Master was moving stones to a corner. He hurried over to help him and said, “Shifu, please just let us do that.” Without even lifting his head, the Master said, “You earn your merits, I’ll earn mine.”

When the hired workers were finished and had left for the day, the Master and all the disciples continued to work at night. On empty ground, they laid stones, built walls with bricks, and put tiles on the roofs. They worked diligently. One by one, the Chan Hall, Dining Hall, Lecture Hall, as well as other buildings all gradually stood tall from the ground.

■ One’s own Children

A monk felt he had encountered a setback, so he told the Master, “Sometimes, it is really difficult to teach the Dharma to people. They are not only stubborn but they also criticize the Dharma and insult the Sangha. That’s really frustrating!”

The Master answered, “Buddhas and bodhisattvas treat sentient beings like their own children. When a child makes a mistake, parents only hope that the child will learn from it and correct it. How can parents be angry with their child?”

■ Precious Opportunities

One day, a taciturn and introverted monk appealed to the Master, “I am afraid to face the public. What should I do?” The Master responded, “Without sentient beings, it is impossible to practice compassion and become a buddha. When facing anxieties brought about by others, we should view these challenges as precious opportunities that I would not have even if I begged for them, that these people are helping me to perfect my practice.”

■ **Wake Up Call**

Before becoming a monk, one disciple worried that he could not wake up on time to attend the morning service at 4:30 am.

He appealed to the Master, “Shifu, if I can’t get up, may I be excused from the morning service?” The Master replied, “Certainly.”

After becoming a monk, his assigned chore was to strike the wooden plank in the monk’s quarters at 3:45 am to wake up everyone for morning service.

■ **Dissolving Karmic Obstacles**

During a meditation session at the Lin Quan Chan Monastery, the Master came to personally supervise it. He applied the awakening staff¹ to almost all of the monks except one. This monk wondered, “Why doesn’t the Master hit me? It would help dissolve my karmic obstacles.”

At that very moment, the Master walked up next to the monk, bent forward slightly, took a look at him, and remarked, “One should dissolve his own obstacles.” Then the Master walked away.

■ **Chung Tai’s Milarepa**

One day, a lay disciple offered an expensive tree to the monastery. The Master instructed a monk, “Find a place to plant this tree.” The very next morning, the Master said, “This place is not good; plant the tree over there.” The monk followed the Master’s instruction.

In the afternoon, the Master interrogated him, “Who asked you to plant it here? Plant it in that

¹ Awakening Staff (香板): A short, flat wooden staff used in the meditation hall to keep meditators’ mind alert and to adjust their postures.

place over there.” Sweating, the monk dug up the tree and planted it again.

That same evening, the Master again commanded him, “It is planted too far left; move it over a little to the right.”

Thus, ever since this precious tree arrived, this monk was kept busy planting and replanting the tree. The lay disciple was concerned and said to the Master, “The tree is expensive. If we keep moving it around, will it not die?”

The Master replied, “If it can help a disciple's achievement in cultivation, however expensive the tree is, would it not be worth the price?”

■ **The Master’s Smile**

A monk joyously approached the Master in his office to report his meditation experience. The Master looked at him, smiled, and did not say anything. After a few days, this monk was annoyed by something, so he came again to the Master to complain about his difficulty. The Master still looked at him and smiled without saying a word.

Looking at the Master’s familiar smile, this monk thought about the distinctly different state of mind that he was in a few days ago. The Master’s smile reminded him of the Buddha’s teaching, “To be calm in quietness is not true stillness; to be calm in chaos is true stillness.”

■ **Don’t Wait Until Next Life**

A monk who had encountered an obstacle in his practice became doubtful as to whether or not he could complete the Path in this lifetime. He therefore asked the Master, “Shifu, in my next life...”

Before he could finish his question, the Master immediately chided him, “Next life? In Zen practice, one maintains this present mind for an eon, and an eon exists in this present mind. In this very lifetime, liberate yourself from the cycle of life and death!”

■ **Take Leave of Life and Death**

A monk who wished to visit his family asked the Master for a leave of absence. The Master said, “Sure, but can you ask for a leave from King Yama (the ruler of the underworld)?” Right then the monk had an awakening.

■ **The True Meaning of Non-Regression**

A monk who had been the abbot at a Zen center for many years had experienced a great deal of difficulties. He felt mentally and physically frustrated in teaching the Dharma and cultivating the bodhisattva path. He wondered how to achieve the “stage of non-regression” in spiritual practice.

One day, the Master came to the center for a meal. Although it was way past mealtime, and despite having been on the road for days and giving Dharma lectures one after another, he was calm and centered, displaying not the slightest trace of weariness.

Seeing this, the abbot inquired, “Shifu, the social climate for teaching the Dharma gets worse and worse. Why do you still build monasteries and Zen centers? Why doesn't your mind regress even for a single moment in your resolve to help all sentient beings?”

The Master closed his eyes and answered firmly, “The worse the conditions get, the stronger your determination should be. That is true non-regression.” As if a flash of lightning jolted his mind, this monk's frustrations immediately disappeared.

■ **Learning of Non-Learning**

A frustrated monk asked the Master, “Shifu, it seems to take forever to learn everything necessary to help all beings. What can I do?” The Master responded, “When one understands the learning of non-learning, then one's learning is perfect and complete!” He continued, “Out of compassion, we never cease learning. To learn is to practice concentration and diligence and it is a blessing. Beyond learning, we also need to understand the principle of non-learning.”

■ **The True Meaning of Attending Services**

Because of his low blood pressure, one of the monks was unable to join the morning and evening services, and this made him feel guilty. He came to the Master's office and asked what he should do. The Master replied, “That's not a problem.”

Surprised, the monk interjected, “But it is the duty of a monk to attend the morning and evening services.” The Master responded, “To work earnestly is to attend services; to work with a mind undisturbed and concentrated is to attend services.” Upon hearing this, the monk was greatly inspired.

■ The Best Laid Plans

Before becoming a member of the Sangha, one monk’s nickname was ‘Perfect Planner.’ On the night he was ordained, he immediately planned a schedule for practice: everyday he would recite the *Diamond Sutra* seven times, chant the Great Compassion mantra 108 times, prostrate to the Buddha 108 times, etc.

After three days, the Master asked him, “How are things after ordination?” He replied proudly, “I chant the Great Compassion mantra 108 times everyday,” thinking that the Master would be proud of his diligence. But instead the Master replied, “Don’t chant any mantra.”

The monk thought, “If I do not chant any mantra, then I should recite more sutras?” So he said to the Master, “I also recite the *Diamond Sutra* seven times and do prostrations 108 times everyday.” The Master said, “Don’t recite any sutra and don’t do prostrations.”

The monk was dumbfounded and asked, “Shifu, if a monk doesn’t recite sutras nor do prostrations, what should he do?” The Master answered, “Keep the present mind still and in suchness, and meditate on the reality of the Middle Way.”

■ The Cypress Tree

Once, in a discussion session on the *Surangama Sutra* at the Chung Tai Buddhist Institute, a disciple brought up a famous Chinese koan.

A monk asked Chan Master Zhaozhou, “What is the essence of the Dharma?” The Chan Master replied, “The cypress tree in front of the courtyard.”

The disciple asked, “But Shifu, I don’t understand, why is the essence of the Dharma the cypress tree in front of the courtyard?” All the disciples held their breaths in anticipation.

The Master responded affirmingly, “It indeed is the cypress tree in front of the courtyard.”

■ **Reality Check**

A disciple said, “Shifu, I really, really want to change my assignment!” The Master replied, “In this world, nothing is real.”

■ **What Time Is It Now?**

In the early days of constructing Lin Quan Chan Monastery, the Grand Master often led his disciples in “working meditation” by laboring at the construction site until past midnight. One night, a monk queried of the Master, “Master, it is already late. Is it time to take a break?” The Master asked, “What time is it now?” “It is one hour before midnight.” The Master turned to him and said, “Oh! It is now just daytime in America.”

The monk paused for a while and then continued to complete the work with the Master until one o’clock in the morning. When they were finished for the night, he realized that he did not feel sleepy at all. Suddenly, he realized the truth of the Master’s words, “Sleeping is also a delusion.”

■ **Bouncing Ball**

A monk was troubled by his wandering thoughts. Not knowing how to deal with them, he felt no peace and asked the Master what to do.

The Master said, “Thoughts come; thoughts go. Just ignore them. If you don’t hit a ball, it won’t bounce.”

■ **Letting Go**

At Chung Tai, the Master always teaches the disciples the importance of letting go of attachments. This is especially applicable in the construction office since architects and designers usually want to establish their own styles and approaches.

In every project, the monks in charge would create a variety of designs and ask for the

Master's opinion. Invariably, they would put the designs they deem to be unsatisfactory at the bottom of the proposed files. Ironically, the Master frequently picked one of the less favored designs, which turned out to bring surprisingly wonderful results.

However, when the designers were no longer attached to their own views, the Master would say, "Good! This is a nice way to do it! Let's follow this idea."

■ **Pebbles in the Stream**

Many years ago, as the Master was standing by the clear and rippling waters of the creek at Lin Quan Chan Monastery, he commented to the monk next to him, "In the years to come, my disciples will all look like the pebbles in this bubbling creek – perfectly rounded."

In the ensuing years, the Master's many disciples bumped, turned, and settled in the continuous flow of the master's Dharma teachings, polishing off each other's rough edges and becoming well-rounded.