

(Opposite)
Landscape (detail)
by Fan Song, 1872–1922
Ink on paper, China

The Path to Where You Are

The path to awakening can seem long and arduous, and sometimes you may feel you've lost your way. But the destination, says **Guo Gu**, is always just beneath your feet.

CASE 31

ZHAOZHOU TESTS THE OLD GRANNY

THE CASE A monk asked an old granny, "Which way is the road to Mount Wutai?" The old granny replied, "Straight ahead!" When the monk took a few steps in that direction, the old granny remarked, "Yet another fine monk goes off like that!"

Later, the monk brought this up to Zhaozhou, who said, "Wait till I go and check out this old granny for you." The next day Zhaozhou went to the old granny and asked the exact same question. Her answer was the same as before.

When Zhaozhou returned, he gathered his congregation and said, "I've seen through the old granny of Mount Wutai for you all."

WUMEN'S COMMENT The old granny only knew how to sit within her headquarters tent and launch her stratagem to catch the thieves. She did not know that old man Zhaozhou was good at creeping into her tent and menacing her fortress. Furthermore, he did not have the outward marks of a great man. Examining them, both had transgressed. But tell me, where did Zhaozhou see through this old granny?

THE VERSE *The questions were the same,
And so were the answers.
In the cooked rice, there is sand;
In the mud, there are thorns.*

Zhaozhou, pulling tricks out of his sleeve—when will he stop? Wumen is extremely kind in creating a *huaou* out of this *gong'an* [Japanese, koan]: Where did Zhaozhou see through this old granny? Allow me to add to Wumen's words: Not only did Zhaozhou see through this old granny, she also saw right through Zhaozhou, through and through. What is it they saw?

The old granny runs a tea shop at the base of Mount Wutai in northeastern China. This word "granny," or *po*, refers to an old woman but also suggests a person of wit and resourcefulness, usually someone marginal and ambiguous in social status, one who crosses social

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boundaries. In premodern popular fictions, a granny is depicted as a witch or a sorceress. There are many of these old grannies in Chan or Zen stories.

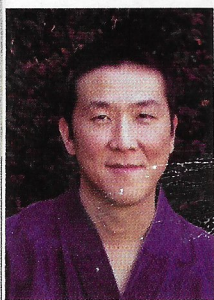
Mount Wutai was, and still is, one of the greatest pilgrimage sites in Chinese Buddhism. Even before Chinese Buddhism, it was a great Taoist site, a sacred mountain. It is said to be the abode of Manjushri Bodhisattva, the embodiment of wisdom; pilgrims' records from premodern times describe encounters there with manifestations of Manjushri. Not only did Chinese pilgrims in premodern times go there, but it is also visited by many Korean and Japanese pilgrims today.

So this granny had probably encountered hundreds, if not thousands, of these seekers, who always asked for directions to Mount Wutai. She always gave the same answer, "Straight ahead!" As they followed her direction and went straight ahead, she would say, "Yet another fine monk goes off like that!" This expression, in Chinese, has the tone of mockery and indifference. What did she mean?

Word got around to Zhaozhou, whose Guanyin Temple was fairly close to this region. Because of the words she spoke and her confrontational, non-deferential manner, people thought that perhaps the granny was a Chan master in disguise. When Zhaozhou heard about her, he went to check her out. So this case took place when Zhaozhou was in his eighties, or even later. He did not have to personally go check out this old granny, but he went out of compassion for his disciples. When he came back, he gathered his monks, who were anxious to hear what had happened. But all he said was, "I went and saw through her." And then he left. Everyone was dumbfounded, wanting to hear more.

That was the genius of Zhaozhou—his ability to stir up a fuss when there was really nothing to be stirred. Yet it was necessary that he do this in order to instill in his students the questioning mind: "What is it that Zhaozhou has seen through?"

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Wumen further stirs up fuss with his comment:

The old granny only knew how to sit within her headquarters tent and launch her stratagem to catch the thieves. She did not know that old man Zhaozhou was good at creeping into her tent and menacing her fortress. Furthermore, he did not have the outward marks of a great man. Examining them, both had transgressed. But tell me, where did Zhaozhou see through this old granny?

Before warfare, generals sit in tents and devise battle strategies; they direct the army as to what, where, when, and how they should strike. Here, Wumen makes an analogy with the art of war. Who is the enemy? Who are the thieves? Zhaozhou is one. It is he who can easily sneak into her tent and wreak havoc. Why? Because Zhaozhou was a small, scrawny guy. He was so unassuming looking, so unthreatening, that people would have easily allowed him to get into the tent without a second thought. Little did they know that if he came into the tent, he would be able to see right through her. In calling Zhaozhou a person "without the marks of a great man," Wumen suggests that his actions are like those of a thief, sneaking around another person's place. How could a great Chan master do that? However, Wumen is actually praising Zhaozhou for his skill in means and his kindness in setting up a trap for his disciples.

A Chan master would do anything to help students. This is very much like what happened between Manjushri and Vimalakirti in the *Vimalakirti Sutra*. In Mahayana Buddhism, Vimalakirti, like Manjushri, symbolizes wisdom. The story goes that once Vimalakirti pretended to be sick, and the Buddha, playing along, decided to send his disciples to visit this great man in hopes that he would teach them. But none of the Buddha's disciples wanted to go because at one time or another, Vimalakirti had shown his superior wisdom and mocked their narrow views about the buddhadharma.

Vimalakirti was particularly confrontational, like a Chan master; if he saw something wrong he would comment on it. He didn't set up any props or impose preconceived ideas about how practitioners should behave. According to the sutra, he practiced



in brothels, had concubines, and was a very wealthy merchant; he was the embodiment of the truth that samsara is nirvana. So only one disciple agreed to go visit Vimalakirti: Manjushri. But when everyone saw that Manjushri was going, they knew that it was going to be a showdown, so now they all wanted to go. Manjushri and Vimalakirti did have a showdown on the teaching of nonduality—they both saw right through each other.

This is what's happening here, except Zhaozhou went alone, perhaps intentionally. If he had brought his students, his cover would have been blown. Zhaozhou came back and instilled this unsurpassable question in the heart of his students: "What is it that our teacher has seen through? What does this 'straight ahead' mean?"

*The questions were the same,
And so were the answers.
In the cooked rice, there is sand;
In the mud, there are thorns.*

Some of the lines in this verse may seem like they express hidden impurities—sand in rice and thorns in mud—but they are just stock expressions in Chan of the impossible. The point is, don't put sand in the rice that you eat and don't drag your feet in mud when you walk. Instead, walk on a clear path. How can you cook sand and expect to get rice? If you think you can, then you will be walking in mud with thorns—everywhere you go you will be poked. Wumen uses these Chan expressions to warn people in their Chan practice. Why? Because this is exactly what people do in practice: they try to cook sand

and expect to eat rice, and they walk in mud and get poked by thorns. The sand is erroneous views; the thorns are the consequences. It is precisely because people erroneously think that practice leads to awakening that Chan masters recommend practice.

From the Chan perspective, practice does not *produce* enlightenment. If it were produced, if it were gained, then it could be destroyed and lost. Don't you know that it's all good? The rice is already cooked. The mud has already been leveled. This is the correct view in Chan practice. So is there a need to practice? You may think, "Then what's the point?" You must practice hard and, at the same time, know that it's all good. You may know this intellectually, but you must personally realize it. How? Do something futile and continue to exhaust yourself until your sense of self, along with all of its attachments, drops away. Only then will you realize that within you there is something already indestructible, limitless, and inexhaustible. You must find out for yourself. So while it may seem that practice is really to get rid of the covers that blind us to who we are, in awakening there is really nothing that covers or binds. Our previous efforts and struggles were just a fantasy.

Yet, from the perspective of the practitioner, yes, vexations are harmful to ourselves and to those around us. So, for the sake of helping other people, we must live and be with others in harmony. We should reduce our own vexations for others, not just for ourselves. We are intimately connected to one another. But from the perspective of awakening, our buddhanature is not something that can be gained or lost or cultivated. Therefore, practice is futile.

The Chan saying "cooking sand to make rice" is similar to another saying, "selling water next to a spring," which means, of course, that people can get the water themselves. If you misunderstand this point and think you should get rid of what's in your hand in order to get "water," then you are mistaken. If you think like this, then everywhere you go, all the mud that you dredge through will be "full of thorns." Everywhere you go, there will be an obstacle. Thinking that practice will give you something that you don't already have, or that practice will help you get rid of vexations that you do have, is the mind-set of the unenlightened. Vexations are the normal display of the mind. Yet practitioners will not succumb to them.

The difference between an awakened person and the unawakened is that the former displays vexations to teach sentient beings, while the latter gives

rise to vexations that spread like a disease, harming the person and infecting others. No teacher is perfect, but a good teacher is careful in practice. He or she recognizes immediately when vexations are present and will not let them manifest in body and speech. If he or she demonstrates something that appears to be anger, or craving, or desire, it may be a teaching or a test for that particular student. Don't think that if a teacher can do it, then so can you. Good teachers abide by the precepts. If they fail in their own practice, then it's important to help them resume their practice. Good teachers will not fall prey to breaking precepts. The last thing they want is to hurt students. This is very different from people who have vexations but don't recognize them as such. They infect others with their vexing views and justify their actions as "expedient means." That said, we need to have compassion—even bodhisattvas can be under the influence of the three poisons of desire, anger, and ignorance.

To practice is to have a "straightforward mind." This doesn't mean confrontational or outspoken. It means your heart is kind and your mind is free from vexations. The straightforward mind is a principle for Chan practice; it is also what Vimalakirti advocates in the *Vimalakirti Sutra*. In the story, the old granny says the way to Wutai is "Straight ahead!" She is telling us how one should go about practicing.

Many people's minds are crooked—full of sand and thorns. Some practitioners engage in practice to gain external rewards such as fame, students, money, or Buddhist paraphernalia. The more they practice, the more they accumulate. In doing so, they perpetuate grasping. In the story, the old granny was dealing with pilgrims to Wutai. Perhaps these people were hoping to see Manjushri appear before them. True practitioners of Chan ask not for Manjushri's appearance but rather seeks to find their own wisdom. Why do you have to travel to Wutai—thousands of miles—to locate wisdom?

All of these gong'an cases reveal different facets of your life as a practitioner. Ask yourself, "How do I practice?" and "What is my practice? If I go to Wutai, will it prove that I am a practitioner? If I sit at the dharma center, right in front of the teacher so he can see how well I sit, will that demonstrate that I am practicing?" What constitutes practice and non-practice? Between your own life and death, you should ask why you are here. Are you here to make something else better? Are you here to gain something? Are you here to get rid of something?



Landscape
by Fan Song

My message to you is this: You are fine. Live your life fully, but stop chasing after things.

This does not mean that you should give up what you have or move to the mountains. No. You are active participants in the world, in society, yet at the same time, you are not bound or defined by the different roles you play, the different things you do. Resolve your existential dilemma or question; that's what this case is all about. The Chan way is to force practitioners to confront this again and again, until they have no way out but to face and resolve it. This is no easy task. But the alternative is that we live in delusion and don't live in a "straightforward" way.

"Who am I? What is the meaning of all this?"

We are conditioned to put aside these existential questions, to obscure them behind the facade of makeup, better products, iPads, fancy clothes, a new car, or a bigger house. The whole world becomes a mask that prevents us from confronting our life's purpose. It's not to say that we should deny the world and not have these things. Vimalakirti had all of them! But amid all this material that blinds and conceals, what is it? Where is our wisdom?

Zhaozhou is able to see through the facade. Here, he teaches his disciples to do the same. He instills this sense of wonderment in us, what we call the great "doubt sensation," or questioning mind. The great doubt is not suspicion but is founded on great conviction that comes from personal experience of buddhadharma, which runs through our veins like blood. It is that which makes us come alive.

This gong'an can make you come alive. Where is the Mount Wutai in your life? How are you going about getting there? Are you cooking sand and expecting rice? Are you dredging through mud filled with thorns? What have your teachers, and all the generations of masters, seen through?

Straight ahead! **BD**