

Dizang Planting the Fields

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Book of Serenity, Case 12

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Pointer

Scholars plow with the pen, orators plow with the tongue. We patch-robed mendicants lazily watch a white ox on open ground, not paying attention to the rootless auspicious grass. How to pass the days?

The Main Case

Dizang asked Xiushan, “Where do you come from?”

Xiushan said, “From the South.”

Dizang said, “How is Buddhism in the South these days?”

Xiushan said, “There’s extensive discussion.”

Dizang said, “How can that compare to me here planting the fields and making rice to eat?”

Xiushan said, “What can you do about the world?”

Dizang said, “What do you call the world?”

The Verse

Source and explanation variously are all made up;

Passing to ear from mouth, it comes apart.

Planting fields, making rice—ordinary household matters;

Only those who have investigated to the full would know—

Having investigated to the full, you clearly know there’s nothing to seek.

Zifang after all didn’t care to be enfeoffed as a marquis;

Forgetting his state he returned, same as fish and birds,

Washing his feet in the Canglang, the hazy waters of autumn.

Dizang lived in China in the late 800s A.D. The story about his first meeting with Xiushan is interesting. Xiushan was traveling with two other teachers through the central part

of the country. When the weather turned cold with icy rain, the pilgrims found they couldn't cross over the swollen streams so they put up at Master Dizang's temple for the night.

It was very cold and Xiushan and the other masters huddled around the charcoal burner to get some warmth, completely ignoring Dizang. Perhaps it was a small temple, or maybe Dizang was a master they had never heard of, but the fact that they ignored him was an immediate indication of their attitude. Dizang wanted to test them so he joined them around the fire and said, "There's something I would like to ask about if I could." Xiushan said, "If there's some matter that you're not clear about, please ask." Dizang said, "Are the mountains, the rivers, and the earth identical or separate from you elders?" Xiushan said, "Separate." Dizang held up two fingers. Xiushan hurriedly said, "Identical, identical." Dizang held up two fingers and walked away.

One of the other masters asked, "What was the meaning of the abbot's holding up two fingers?" Xiushan said, "He just did that arbitrarily." The other master, Fayan, said, "Don't so crudely insult him!" Xiushan responded, "Are there elephant tusks in a rat's mouth?" He was really putting down Dizang, essentially saying that the abbot had no idea what he was talking about. But Fayan was not so sure.

The next day, when they were all getting ready to leave, Fayan lingered behind saying, "You go on. I'm going to stay here for a while and see if Dizang may just have something to teach. If he does, I'll come and find you." Fayan then went on to study with Dizang for quite some time. Eventually, Xiushan and the other master came back and had other encounters with Dizang. That's how the dialogue of this present koan took place.

In all religious traditions there is a dynamic tension between those who discuss the teachings and those who live them. Addressing this difference, the pointer states, *Scholars plow with the pen, orators plow with the tongue. We patch-robed mendicants lazily watch a white ox on open ground.* I've recently had a couple of experiences with people who spoke of being deeply committed to their religious faith. Yet, when they faced very serious crises in their lives, their faith dissolved. I asked if their religion was helping to sustain them. Their answer was an emphatic, "No."

It seemed to me that it was not that their religion was not helping them, but rather that they weren't turning to their spiritual practice for help. If our practice is only based on faith, then when we encounter something that shakes us to the core, our faith can be very easily shattered. If our own lives and our way of seeing things have not been transformed, then our doubts can easily overwhelm us. What initially may have been faith must become verified as our own experience. Then when we get rocked by situations, as we inevitably will, we don't have to rely on faith alone.

Dizang asked Xiushan, "Where do you come from?" Xiushan said, "From the South." Dizang said, "How is Buddhism in the South these days?" Xiushan said, "There's extensive discussion." Bodhidharma taught that Zen is a special transmission outside the scriptures. It

doesn't rely on words and letters. It doesn't rely on anything that can be discussed. In the poem Wansong points out why this is so. He says, *Source and explanation variously are all made up.*



"Source and explanation variously are all made up. Passing to ear from mouth, it comes apart."

Anything we can discuss is a mental construction. Words may be pointing to reality, but they themselves are an abstraction. They're descriptions of something—perhaps a true description—but they are not the truth itself. So when we take them as the truth, we get into trouble. If we base our practice on faith in words, faith in someone else's experience which we have not confirmed for ourselves, then we're on shaky ground.

Wansong says, *Source and explanation variously are all made up. Passing to ear from mouth, it comes apart.* In the instant it takes for the truth to go from your mouth to my ear, it comes apart. It dissolves and becomes something else. It becomes precarious and unreliable. Wansong says that it's possible to commune by speech or to commune with the source, that is, to perceive directly. Communion by speech without communion with the source is like the sun being hidden by clouds. The sun is there but you can't see it or feel its warmth. Communion with the source without communion by speech is like a snake going into a bamboo tube. When there is experience but there's no expression, no way to articulate and offer it, that's like a snake going into a bamboo tube. It's trapped and immobile—useless. Communion with the source and communion by speech together is like the sun in the open sky. Communion neither with the source nor by speech is like a dog howling in a thicket of reeds.

Clearly, this is not a matter of dispensing with speech altogether. Otherwise, Bodhidharma would have urged us to avoid speech. He didn't. He said, "Don't rely on it." The question then remains, what is to be expressed? When Xiushan declared, "*There's extensive discussion in the South*" and Dizang responded, "*How can that compare to me here planting the fields and making rice to eat?*" What was he saying? Was he pointing to different aspects of his everyday life as Zen? Planting my field, making my rice, getting on the subway, walking up the hill to my cabin. In a sense, everyone plants their own fields and makes their own rice. That's what we do everyday. Is Dizang's expression of that somehow different?

A few weeks ago I received a letter from a prisoner who was trying to make the case that "Since everything in the world is perfect, everything I do is natural." I wrote him back and said, "Although what you say is true, when that perfection is not realized, when it is not your

actual experience, that is an extremely dangerous belief. What do you mean when you say that something is natural? If you hit someone, is it okay because it's natural? Does it mean you can't hurt someone; that you can't hurt yourself?" To even begin talking about this you have to understand deeply what you mean by perfect. You also have to realize what you mean by natural. It is true: everything we do is the natural act of a buddha. But if we haven't realized this, although the reality is medicine, the concept is potentially poisonous.

Wansong also says, *Planting the fields and making rice are ordinary household matters. Then he adds, Only those who have investigated to the full would know. Having investigated to the full, you clearly know there's nothing to seek.* That's the naturalness of the Buddha, yet it's not an easy thing to see. When we are satisfied with just believing it and then basing our actions on this belief, it turns into delusion. We easily become inert and static within that belief. On the other hand, when we've realized that naturalness as our lives, it's freeing.

The key of that realization is to investigate fully. What is it to investigate to the full? How do we do that? When we do zazen, we sit down, turn the light upon ourselves, and open our true eye. We don't turn away, no matter what may come up. We come home and we stay home. When Master Dogen says, "To study the Way is to study the self", this is what he means. He's talking about investigating to the full. In order to do that we must concentrate all of our energies in one place, and stay there. We can't allow ourselves to be distracted by the various images that appear before our eyes.

Think of the Buddha sitting under the Bodhi tree. He wouldn't leave. He wouldn't quit. He wouldn't turn away. This seems like a simple thing, but in actuality it is the most difficult thing we will ever undertake. But to remain unmoved within a changing environment frees us to be able to see clearly for the first time.

In the earliest sutras the Buddha talked frequently about the merits of being unmovable in one's practice. In one case, he described what it was like to sit in meditation in a forest, at that time a potentially dangerous practice since monks were sometimes killed by wild animals or bandits. On encountering fear, the Buddha said: "While I dwell there, what if a wild animal should come up to me, or a peacock knock off a branch [make a sound] or the wind rustle the leaves? What now if this fear and dread arise up in me? Why do I dwell always expecting fear and dread? What if I subdue it while keeping the same posture that I am in when it comes upon me?" In other words, what if I just stay put, unmoving, in the midst of that fear?

"While I walked and this fear and dread came upon me, I neither stood, nor sat, nor lay down until I had subdued that fear and dread. When I stood, and the fear and dread came upon me, I neither walked, nor sat, nor lay down until I had subdued that fear and dread." Wherever he was when he encountered the barrier, he stayed there. He wouldn't move. If he was sitting, he wouldn't get up; he wouldn't change his position until he had passed through the fear. If he was walking, he wouldn't stop walking until he had walked right through it.

He's saying something very profound. He's not just talking about physical movement; he's talking about what to do when we encounter the impossible, the unendurable, the frightening—the very thing that we cannot do. What do we do? The Buddha says, right where you are, in that moment of recognition, stay there. Be unmoving.

We have become an intensely unsettled people. Very few of us live near the place of our birth. Many of us live miles, even continents away from our families or the communities of our childhood. In a sense, there are very few real communities anymore. That tendency to be on the move continuously has leached into every aspect of our lives: our relationships, our work, our homes. Of course, this restlessness has also taken firm residence in our minds. Why else do we keep moving away? Everything originates in the mind.

Our difficulty with staying in one place with one thing is exactly what the Buddha was talking about. When we keep moving, this movement prevents us from seeing beneath the superficial. Driving down the highway, you can see the countryside as it passes by, but it's a blur. There's virtually no detail. That's why the billboards have to be so big and obvious. Riding on a bicycle, you see a little bit more. Walking down the road, you notice even more. Then if you stop moving altogether and just stand still, things really come into focus. Suddenly, everything begins to become personal.

Living on Mount Tremper for the last sixteen years, every day I have walked up and down the path between my cabin and the Monastery building, passing the same trees, walking over the same stones, every morning seeing Mount Pleasant in front of me. Seeing the light change, watching this piece of the world pass through the seasons. Every morning the light shifts a little bit as the sun begins to climb higher in the sky, and as it climbs the mountain comes to life. As the buds appear and the leaves unfurl, the world is completely transformed. Coming down that hill in the rain, when it's hot and muggy, when it's snowy, when it's bright and clear, I notice the migration and habits of the animals. During some years there's a scurrying chipmunk crossing my path at every step. The next year, I can hardly find one. I would never notice such details but for walking down that simple path every day.



"The Buddha says, right where you are, in that moment of recognition, stay there. Be unmoving."

Some years back I began to notice that the path was getting washed out. As the back and forth traffic increased, we were cutting a groove in the dirt, making a perfect little river bed. When it rained the water poured down that path and started to erode it. To protect the path we put wooden troughs across it and laid them with gravel, and this seemed to stop the erosion. Since it worked so well we did the same thing in other places where we'd noticed erosion. I thought, "What a great thing. We're helping to save the mountain."

Then as time went on and a few more seasons passed, I realized that our funneling of the runoff water was causing a different wash-out problem. All the water was now channeled down the banks into the streambeds, rather than spreading out more diffusely. We were saving the path but destroying the banks. We had to find another way to bring the water down to the stream without taking the bank with it. But who would have noticed this if there were no eyes to see? How could I have noticed this if I hadn't kept watching, noticing, being interested, being concerned, loving this mountain?

That's what naturally happens when we stay in one place. Through our investigation, we begin to love that place, because we begin to see into its perfection, its inherent beauty which includes its problems. In investigating it, whether it be our own mind or a piece of our earth, what we experience is no longer abstract but something that matters deeply to us.

When Dizang says, "Planting fields and making rice," his activity is the whole universe. How can anything compare to this? When there's nothing outside, there's nothing to compare it to. When Mu is your whole universe, there's nothing that can compare to that. Then things are seen just as they are: luminescent, brilliant, perfect, natural, real. Not conceptualized, not perfect the way the dictionary defines "perfect." Perfect as buddha nature, every creature complete and perfect.

But Xiushan challenges Dizang, "*What can you do about the world?*" You sit in one place, investigating to the full, and all around you the world is falling apart. Xiushan implores, "What can you do about that?" Dizang asks, "*What do you call the world?*" The

commentary says, “Instead of asking ‘What do you call the world?’ he should have said, ‘I’m busy planting the fields.’” Yet Dizang’s answer turns the question back to Xiushan. When Dizang says, “*How can that compare to me here planting the fields and making rice to eat?*” what world is he experiencing? When it fills the whole universe then there’s nothing to compare it with; there is no other world.

But what about those who can’t plant their fields or make rice to eat because they have none? What about that real suffering? Dizang is pointing to that perfection. He’s saying, How do you separate where you are from where I am? How do you separate planting the fields from feeding the hungry? How can you separate yourself from another, your spirituality from your life, your actions from your responsibility? The motivation has to be personal. The study has to be intimate. It has to matter to you.

I was reading a book about education. The author described the fourth largest city in one of the midwestern states that is intensely destitute, a really forsaken place. The schools are so impoverished that some of them don’t even have toilet paper, never mind books and educational materials. There are five or six huge, wealthy industries in that city. Each of these industries has incorporated itself as a town, although these “towns” do not even have any residents. It’s a paper town, to enable the corporation to completely sever any connection with the city in which it resides, so it doesn’t have to assume any responsibility for the neighboring communities and their people. What an extraordinary amount of effort and energy expended to create a living lie. They are effectively saying, “This is where we work, and it has nothing to do with these people, this city, this destitution.” What an amazing feat of illusion.

The only reason we will stay in one place and investigate it is because we care about it. And why should we care? Because our lives depend on it? Is that a good enough reason? Perhaps because if we don’t we will literally die as a person? Because if we don’t we will be extinguishing our own wisdom and compassion? Is that a cause for concern? The thing that is so debilitating is the illusion that we can separate ourselves; that we can not be responsible for our actions; that we can be all one thing and not another; that I can do something and not affect you. Those illusions create so much extraordinary suffering. How do we get people to care? How do we get ourselves to care enough to stay in one place and investigate?

I met a man recently who works for a not-for-profit organization in Washington that does conflict resolution, especially for religious groups. He’s been spending a great deal of his time in the Balkans, trying to resolve the incredibly complex and deeply embedded conflicts there. I asked him how he approached such a task and he said, “We realized a long time ago that it’s fruitless to go to the top. You have to work your way down the food chain until you can get to real people who are having everyday interactions with other real people. You can’t deal with bureaucrats for whom everything is happening on paper; it’s just too abstract. They don’t see; they don’t feel. They have no sense that their actions affect people in a specific way. You have to get to the people who are affecting other people in specific ways. You can

get them to care about what they're doing. They're not divorced from their actions and effects."

When Xiushan says, "*What can you do about the world*" Dizang says, "*What do you call the world?*" What do you understand as the world? What do you understand as yourself? This is not a matter of explanation. In talking about it, it all comes apart and it doesn't have anything to do with you anymore. It doesn't have anything to do with the world anymore. It doesn't have anything to do with people, with real lives, with human suffering. Only those who have investigated to the full would know, and having done so, they clearly know there's nothing to seek.

This is the realization of the Buddha. The Buddha has no marks, no adornments. That's why Wansong says in the poem, *Zifang after all didn't care to be enfeoffed as a marquis*. Why would he want to be made into anything? Practice is not self-improvement. You are not on your way to becoming a better someone. Returning to the source, we discover the one who perfectly fulfills his or her nature.

Dogen, at the conclusion of "Zazenshin," includes a poem on zazen that ends:

The water is clear right through the earth.

A fish goes along like a fish.

The sky is vast, straight into the heavens,

A bird flies just like a bird.

Do you understand? A buddha lives just like a buddha: walks, talks, lies down, gets up, plants the fields, makes rice to eat. But what is it to live your life like a buddha? That requires full investigation. That's why Dogen says, "The essential function of all the buddhas, the functioning essence of all the ancestors. It is present without thinking. It is completed without interacting." You don't create it. You can't destroy it. You can't enhance or diminish it.

The difficult thing is seeing that it is not difficult. The great, arduous journey is to realize that you can't get there from here. That's why this is so revolutionary. Because it doesn't abide or conform to anything, including itself. Just be what you already are, which you can truly discover only by investigating to the full. What a wonderful way to live a life.

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