

# Passionate Zen

BY ZEN MASTER WU BONG

It is not uncommon for people to question whether there is any room for passionate feelings in Zen practice. After all, the second of the Four Great Vows clearly asks us to do away with any kind of passion. Each morning at the beginning of practice we recite: Passions are endless, we vow to extinguish them all. [*Note: The vow has since been changed to "delusions are endless" to clarify this point.*]

While the word "passion" has several meanings, they all revolve around an intense emotion which compels some kind of action. Usually, this intense emotion is associated with sexual feelings, with feelings of love, or with anger and hate. Although usually we see clearly the suffering that comes from such investments, it is very difficult to give them up. In fact, it almost seems inhuman to be completely dispassionate. Would the great works of art, or some of the greatest achievements of human science have appeared without "passion" playing a role in the creative process?

In *Dropping Ashes on the Buddha* we find the story of Won Hyo, the most famous monk of his time in Korea. Won Hyo Sunim one day went to visit the great Zen Master Dae An. Before arriving at the Zen Master's mountain cave, Won Hyo already heard his beautiful chanting. Upon arriving at the cave he was chagrined to find the old man crying bitterly over the corpse of a dead baby deer. Since the Buddha taught dispassion, as expressed in the Four Great Vows, how could this highly enlightened man be so upset over the death of a deer? Won Hyo asked the Zen Master to explain what had happened. The old monk said that the mother deer had been killed by some hunters, and he had tried to save the baby deer by feeding it milk which he obtained by begging from the nearby village. Because people would not give milk for an animal, he lied that it was needed for his son. "A dirty monk," they would say, but some would give milk. After a time, however, the nearby villagers refused to give him more milk. He had to go further, and further, and finally after obtaining a little milk, he returned three days later to his cave to find the baby deer already dead from hunger. "You don't understand," said the master. "My mind and the fawn's mind are the same. It was very hungry. It wants milk, I want milk. Now it is dead. Its mind is my mind. That's why I am weeping. I want milk." Won Hyo began to understand this man's great compassion and became his student.

This story very wonderfully points out that to experience one's true self, if anything, makes us more human. It allows our natural love and compassion to function freely. The passions that we must extinguish are those born out of our anger, desire, and ignorance, but to vow to extinguish all passions, or to save all sentient beings, is in itself a kind of passion. The difference is that of direction. The motivation behind such passion is not for "me," but for

"others." The name we give to such passion is Great Love, Great Compassion, and Great Bodhisattva Way.

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