

Not Difficult, Not Easy: Stories from the Lay Lineage

BY ZEN MASTER WU BONG

Adapted from a talk at Providence Zen Center in February, 1987.

Although we usually associate the transmission of Buddha's teachings with a lineage of monks, it is very interesting that in China, India, and Korea, we can always find someone who, while not a monk, shined brilliantly and inspires us still today. This is especially interesting in the West, where most of the dharma students are laypeople.

Historically, the Zen patriarchal tradition has been one of celibate monks. Our school is no exception. Culminating in Zen Master Seung Sahn, every teacher in this lineage has been a monk. Yet here, today, while we are certainly preserving that tradition, something else is emerging, a widening of what traditionally was the province of the celibate monk, of the hermit. It's not that this teaching was hidden from lay people in any way, but that in the past people who practiced really hard were expected, and willing, to give up any external ties and become monks.

In the India of Buddha's time, there was a very great teacher who was not a monk. His name was Vimalakirti. One of the great scriptures of Buddhism, the Vimalakirti Nirveda Sutra, is devoted entirely to his teaching. He was considered so brilliant and so sharp, and his dharma dialogues with others were so deep, that his contemporaries were afraid to engage him in dharma combat. Even Buddha's greatest disciples, such as Manjushri and Mandalayana, were in awe of him.

Tradition has it that Vimalakirti was very sick one day, and the Buddha asked his disciples to visit him. Led by Manjushri, who was foremost among the disciples, they came to Vimalakirti's house. The discussion went somewhat like this:

Vimalakirti: "Ah, welcome. I see that you have come, but you are not showing a sign of coming."

Manjushri: "Yes, indeed."

It was a kind of a metaphysical talk which was very popular in those days. After this discussion went on for some time, Vimalakirti changed the tempo by asking all the guests, "What is the law of entering the gate of Not Two?" In turn each gave a short discourse.

Manjushri spoke last, saying "This entering of the gate of Not Two is something that cannot be said. There, there is no name, no form. It cannot be expressed in any way." He asked, "Now, you, Vimalakirti, please give us your understanding of entering the gate of Not Two." Vimalakirti only sat in silence.

Manjushri recognized this silence and said, "Wonderful! That indeed is the true gate of Not Two!"

Most of the stories that we have from those days are about great monks. It's very instructive to hear a story about a person who used a different way of life to teach others.

In China, there were several great laypeople. Perhaps the most notable was Layman P'ang and his family. It is said that each of them was enlightened. His daughter was said to be especially brilliant. Although she was the youngest member of the family, she was very sharp and had a way of having the last word.

One day, the Layman, musing on life and practice, uttered these words of wisdom: "Oh, difficult, difficult, difficult! It's like trying to scatter ten thousand sesame seeds over a tree." The wife right away retorted, "Oh, easy, easy, easy! It's like touching your feet to the ground when you get off the bed." The daughter was not to be outdone. Immediately she commented, "Not difficult, not easy! On the tips of ten thousand grasses, the patriarchs' meaning." What kind of patriarchs' meaning can we find on the tips of grass? If you find that, you will get the true dharma eye. That this wonderful family managed to keep the vitality of the dharma in their busy lives is very important. Such examples are priceless.

In Korea, the story of Sul is very famous. She was born to a devout family of Buddhists. Her father was a very strong practitioner and the little daughter loved to chant with him. She would often accompany him on visits to great Zen Masters, including her father's teacher. One day, this teacher said to her, "I have heard that you are practicing very hard, so I want to give you a present. This present is the words 'Kwan Seum Bosal.' Repeat these words all the time, then you will get great happiness."

All the time that she could, she recited the mantra "Kwan Seum Bosal." One day, as she was chanting Kwan Seum Bosal in her room, she heard the sound of a temple bell and her mind opened up. She understood that she and Kwan Seum Bosal are the same. Everything is Kwan Seum Bosal.

She became very happy, but also a little bit wild. She no longer chanted "Kwan Seum Bosal" and was seen talking to trees and plants. One day, as her father came into her room, he noticed that a sutra book he had given her was not on the altar, but underneath Sul, who used it to prop up. Her father became furious, and said, "How dare you sit on this scripture! How dare you defile the truth?" The little girl turned to him and said, "Father, do you think the truth is contained in words?" Seeing his confusion, Sul said, "Please ask your teacher." The father told his teacher about Sul. "Is my daughter going crazy?" he asked. The teacher replied, "Your daughter's not crazy. You're crazy!" Then the Zen Master said, "Don't worry!" He wrote a poem for Sul:

When you hear a wooden chicken crow in the evening,
You will understand the country where your mind is born.
Outside the door of my house,
The willow is green, the flower is red.

When Sul read the poem she said "Ahah. So the Zen Master is also just like this." Then she took the scripture from the floor, dusted it off, put it on the altar, and behaved quite normally from then on.

In time Sul became a wife and mother, and eventually had many grandchildren. She became known as a great Zen Master. Although she didn't wear special robes, she was so clear and practiced so hard that her daily life, her everyday speech, helped many people. After one of her granddaughters died, Sul was very, very sad; she cried and cried. The people around her were shocked because of her reputation as a great Zen Master. Someone asked, "You already understand that there is no life or death. Why are you crying for your granddaughter?" Then Sul cried even harder, and said "You don't understand! Because I cry, my granddaughter can enter into nirvana." She was quite extraordinary.

What do these stories mean for us? Sometimes we tend to check ourselves, our practice, our life. We try to make one practice better, more high class, another practice low class. Or we check ourselves in the sense, "Am I good, or am I bad? Am I as committed as I should be, or should I do something different?" Sometimes we attach to the outer form of practice. The reason these kinds of outstanding people are important is that they show us very clearly that this practice is not dependent on our appearance. It's not dependent on our way of life. This practice simply means clarity. Our everyday clarity. What are you doing right now, this moment? If you are monk, you have monk's job; if a lay person, you have lay person's job. Keep your correct situation, whatever it is. Moment after moment, keep the great question, "What is this?"

Question: Do you have any famous layperson stories from the present day?

ZMWB: Yes! Nowadays there is a very great story, and it is taking place even as we talk. It is the most important story of all. Everyone must attain this story, become a true Vimalakirti, or Layman P'ang, or Sul. This very moment is that story. So, everyone here is a famous lay person!