

Only Keep "Don't Know" Mind

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One of the most famous kong-ans refers to an incident from the Buddha's own lifetime. Once the Buddha was staying on Vulture Peak mountain. It was time for him to give his usual discourse to the disciples, but the Buddha only sat silently. Everyone started to wonder what was going on. As the assembly was beginning to get restless, the Buddha held up a flower. The entire assembly was baffled; only Mahakashyapa, one of the senior disciples, smiled. Seeing his smile, the Buddha said, "My true Dharma is transmitted to Mahakashyapa."

There are three questions that come out of this kong-an:

1. Buddha picked up a flower. What does this mean?
2. Mahakashyapa smiled. Why did he smile?
3. Buddha's statement, "My true dharma is transmitted to Mahakashyapa," is a big mistake. What could the Buddha have done when Mahakashyapa smiled?

If you don't understand, or if you have an answer but don't know how to respond, only keep a "don't know" mind. That's kong-an practice. Don't hold the kong-an in your thinking mind. The value of kong-an practice is that a kong-an is impervious to intellectual analysis. You can't attain a kong-an intellectually.

Keeping a "don't know" mind means cutting off all thinking. Cutting off all discursive thoughts takes us to the wellspring of our true nature, and brings us to the present moment. What are you doing just now? Paying attention to this moment is what Zen practice is all about. In a kong-an interview situation, the teacher uses kong-ans to understand the student's practice, and to give them "don't know" mind. Kong-ans let the student experience any hindrances they are having.

Any kind of formal practice is a simple situation in which it is easier to cut off thinking. As we do formal practice, it will start to affect our everyday life. Any moment in our life can be understood as a kong-an. As we are able to penetrate the simple situations of kong-ans without being confused by our discursive minds, our intuition starts to grow. Eventually our intuition can grow so that when confronted with complex situations in our lives, the correct response will automatically appear.

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