

Commentary on Hyang Eom's "Up a Tree"

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The Hua Yen Sutra that the last speaker talked about, like other sutras, is a collection of teaching techniques that the Buddha used. When Paul finished his introductory remarks he hit the floor and said, "Wall is white." Then he said, "That's my dharma." This point is really the essence of the Hua Yen Sutra, which means that our practice and all sutras finally come to one thing only ... what is our correct situation, correct relationship and correct function at this moment, any given moment of our life.

Our correct situation means our work situation, our speech situation, our eye-ear-nose-tongue-body-and-mind situation. Our correct relationship is not only to other people, but also our correct relationship to the air, the water, to the ground. Out of all this our correct function appears, which means that our eyes, ears, nose, tongue, body, and mind can function without any hindrance. While we talk about correct situation, correct relationship and correct function, they are in fact inseparable.

One of the kong-ans that we have in the Mu Mun Kwan is the situation that was set up by Zen Master Hyang Eom: "It is like a man hanging from a tree. He is holding to a branch by his teeth. His hands and his legs are all tied, so he cannot grasp another branch, and he cannot grasp the trunk of the tree. Then just at that time somebody comes and asks him "Why did Bodhidharma come to China?" If he does not answer, he is avoiding his duty and will be killed. If he opens his mouth to answer, he will fall off the tree and also die." Then if you are in this tree how do you stay alive? It's a very difficult situation. This is a very interesting kind of kong-an because any understanding cannot help. Any understanding which we have will fail. We cannot do anything. Cannot move hands, cannot use mouth, but there's one thing ... just one thing that's possible.

Zen means to attain our true self. To attain our true self means that truth can function in our life. To let truth function in our life is not to attach to life or death. Without attaching to life or death, we allow love and compassion to naturally function in our life, which means that our obligation to this world is always very clear. We say life, but life is not life. Our body has life and death, but our true life, our true self, has no life nor death. If we can let truth function in our life, then even this kind of a difficult situation is not so difficult. Then even in such a difficult situation our correct situation, correct relationship and correct function appear, which means we attain true life.

Holding on to either life or death, we are like walking corpses. Not holding on to life and death, we are truly alive.

The situation that Zen Master Hyang Eom set up as a Dharma gate for us may appear somewhat exotic. If we examine our lives, however, we may be able to see this situation all too often. In fact, any time that we create and hold on to some duality, we are like this man in the tree. I remember some foolish arguments I had with my parents, whom I tried to convince of the correctness of my ways. It was only when I gave up such foolish notions and simply did what was necessary that our relationship became very intimate, very alive. Maybe that happened to some of you, maybe in some different way.

What this kong-an does is challenge us to find the true way by setting up a seemingly impossible situation. Indeed, it challenges us to the utmost, where it is not enough to be clever. How do we work then with a situation like that? The way to work with it is to leave it alone, only keep don't know. If your practice is mantra practice then only try mantra. If you're keeping a big question, "What am I?" or "What is this?", only keep big question, only keep don't know. Then the kong-an will work by itself. One day the kong-an will appear vivid and completely translucent. The correct response will be there. But it is completely redundant to want something vivid, or something translucent, or something that you do not have in this very moment. To do that is to be lost in the dream world, to lose one's life.

"The man hanging from a branch" kong-an, or any kong-an, is not so important. Most important is to wake up. Be alive! Then, what are you doing right now?