

Koans of Sickness, Old Age and Death: Sickness

Book of Serenity Case 94

Dongshan was ill and a monk asked him: You are ill, teacher, but is there anyone who does not get ill?

Yes, there is, said Dongshan.

The monk asked, Does the one who is not ill take care of you?

I have the opportunity to take care of him, Dongshan replied.

How is it when you take care of him, the monk asked.

Dongshan said, At that time, I don't see the sickness.

Book of Serenity Case 83

Guishan: Where are you coming from?

Daowu: I've come from tending the sick.

Guishan: How many people were sick?

Daowu: There were the sick and the not sick.

Guishan: Aren't you the one who is not sick?

Daowu: Being sick and not being sick have nothing to do with him at all. Speak quickly! Speak quickly!

Guishan: Even if I could say anything, it would have no bearing.

The Blue Cliff Record Case 87

Yun Men: Medicine and disease subdue each other: the whole earth is medicine; what is your self?

Book of Serenity Case 36

Master Ma was unwell.

Monastery superintendent: Master, how is your venerable state these days.

Master Ma: Sun face buddha, moon face buddha.

Koans of Sickness, Old Age and Death: Old Age from *The Hidden Lamp*

The Old Woman's Enlightenment Japan, 18th c.

An old woman went to hear Master Hakuin give a lecture. He said, "Your mind is the Pure Land, and your body is Amida Buddha. When Amida Buddha appears, mountains, rivers, forests, and fields all radiate a great light. If you want to understand, look into your own heart."

The old woman pondered Hakuin's words day and night, waking and sleeping. One day, as she was washing a pot after breakfast, a great light flashed through her mind. She dropped the pot and ran to tell Hakuin. "Amida Buddha filled my whole body. Mountains, rivers, forests, and fields are all shining with light. How wonderful!" She danced for joy.

"What are you talking about?" Hakuin asked. "Does the light shine up your asshole?"

Small as she was, she gave him a big push, saying, "I can see you're not enlightened yet!" They both burst out laughing.

The Old Woman Steals Zhaozhou's Bamboo Shoots China, 9th c.

One day Master Zhaozhou Congshen was outside the monastery and an old woman came along carrying a basket. He asked her, "Where are you going?"

The old woman said, "I'm going to steal Zhaozhou's bamboo shoots."

Zhaozhou asked, "What will you do if you run into Zhaozhou?"

The old woman walked up to Zhaozhou and slapped him.

The Old Woman's Relatives China, 9th c.

Once a monk on pilgrimage met an old woman living alone in a hut. The monk asked, "Do you have any relatives?"

She said, "Yes."

The monk asked, "Where are they?"

She answered, "The mountains, rivers, and the whole earth, the plants and trees, are all my relatives."

The Old Woman Recognizes Mazu China, 8th c.

When Master Mazu Daoyi returned to his native place for a short visit, he was warmly welcomed by his countrymen.

But an old woman, who used to be his next-door neighbor, said, "I thought that all the commotion was caused by the visit of some extraordinary personage. In fact, it's none other than that little chap who is the son of Ma, the garbage collector."

On hearing this, Mazu improvised the following poem:

I advise you not to return to your native place
for no one can be a sage in his own home.
This old woman by the side of the brook
still calls me the garbage man's son!

The Old Woman's Rice Cakes China, 9th c.

Deshan Xuanjian was a great scholar of the *Diamond Sutra*, but he was not a Chan practitioner. He was traveling south in search of the Dharma, carrying his commentaries on the *Diamond Sutra* with him. In the course of his travels he came across an old woman on the roadside selling tea and rice cakes. He asked her, "Who are you?"

She responded, "I am an old woman selling rice cakes." When he asked if he could buy some refreshments from her, she inquired, "Venerable priest, what are you carrying in your bag?"

He said, "I am a scholar of the *Diamond Sutra*, and here I have all my notes and commentaries."

Hearing this, the old woman said, "I have heard that, according to the *Diamond Sutra*, past mind is ungraspable, present mind is ungraspable, and future mind is ungraspable. So where is the mind that you wish to refresh with rice cakes, oh scholar? If you can answer this, you may buy a rice cake from me. If not, you'll have to go elsewhere for refreshment."

Deshan was unable to reply. The old woman then directed him to a Chan master nearby. Deshan burned all his notes and commentaries the next day.

Koans of Sickness, Old Age and Death: Death

The Blue Cliff Record Case 55

Master Tao Wu and his disciple Chien Yuan went to a house to make a condolence call. Yuan hit the coffin and said: Alive or dead?

Wu: I won't say alive and I won't say dead.

Yuan: Why won't you say?

Wu: I won't say.

Halfway back to their monastery.

Yuan: Tell me right away, Teacher. If you don't tell me, I'll hit you.

Wu: You may hit me, but I won't say.

Yuan hit his teacher.

Later after Tao Wu had died, Yuan went to Shih Shuang and told him the story.

Shuang: I won't say alive and I won't say dead.

Yuan: Why won't you say?

Shuang: I won't say, I won't say.

At these words, Yuan awakened.

One day Yuan took a hoe into the dharma hall and walked back and forth with it.

Shuang: What are you doing?

Yuan: I'm looking for relics of our late master."

Shuang: Vast waves spread far and side; foaming billows flood the skies. What relics of our late master are you looking for?

Yuan: This is just where I should apply effort.

Fu of T'ai Yuan said: The late master's relics are still present.

The Gateless Barrier Case 47

The priest Tou-shuai set up three barriers in order to examine his students:

You make your way through the darkness of abandoned grasses in a single-minded search for your self-nature. Now, honored one, where is your nature?

When you have realized your self-nature, you are free of birth and death. When the light of your eyes falls, how are you free?

When you are free of birth and death, you know where to go. When your four elements scatter, where do you go?

Book of Serenity Case 94—poems

Dongshan:

*Though students are many, not one is awakened.
The mistake lies in pursuing the path of others' tongues.
If you want to be able to let go of the body and leave no trace
Practice diligently to walk in emptiness.*

Faqing:

*This year, in the first week of the fifth month
The four gross elements will leave their host
Let the white bones be exposed to the wind
And spare finding a plot from a donor.*

*Seventy-three years, like a lightning flash—
About to go, for you I put a thread through
The iron ox leaps past Korea—
smashing into the emptiness, shattering it into pieces.*

Hongzhi:

Taking off the smelly skin bag,

*Casting away the mass of red flesh
Directly the nose is straight
Immediately, the skull is dry*

Shitou:

*If you want to know the undying person in the hut,
do not separate from this skin bag here and now.*

To live in this world

you must be able
to do three things:
to love what is mortal;
to hold it

against your bones knowing
your own life depends on it;
and, when the time comes to let it go,
to let it go.

—Mary Oliver (from *In Blackwater Woods*, *American Primitive*, 1983)

Book of Serenity Case 94 Three dialogues:

1. A monk: What is the Way?

Xiangyan: A dragon roaring in a dead tree.

Monk: I don't understand.

Xiangyan: Eyeballs in a dry skull. (The wisdom of emptiness)

2. A monk: What is a dragon roaring in a dead tree?

Shishuang: Still having joy.

Monk: What are eyeballs in a dry skull?

Shishuang: Still having consciousness.

3. A monk: What is a dragon howling in a dead tree?

Caoshan: The bloodline is not cut off. (Human connection is still alive.)

Monk: What are eyeballs in a dry skull?

Caoshan: Not entirely dry. (Still able to care.)