

Ungraspable Mind

Shakyamuni Buddha says, “The past mind is ungraspable. The present mind is ungraspable. The future mind is ungraspable.”

This has been a point of study by buddha ancestors who have gouged out the caves and baskets [limited dualistic views] from what is ungraspable in the past, present, and future. They have used the caves and baskets of the self to do so.

This self is ungraspable mind. Thinking and discerning at this very moment is ungraspable mind. The entire body that utilizes the twelve hours of a day is ungraspable mind.

Buddha ancestors understood mind that is ungraspable from the time they entered the inner chambers [of their masters]. Without entering the inner chambers, there would not have been questioning, answering, seeing, and hearing about ungraspable mind. This is not even dreamed of by those who are masters of sutras and treatises, or by shravakas and pratyekabuddhas.

Here is a familiar example:

Deshan Xuanjian was proclaiming that he had mastered the *Diamond Sutra*, calling himself Diamond King Chou. He claimed that he was particularly familiar with Xinlong’s commentary. He had collected twelve bundles of commentaries. It appeared that he was incomparable. However, he was merely a descendant of dharma teachers of letters.

Once, hearing about the unsurpassable dharma transmitted heir to heir in the south, Deshan felt very competitive. He learned about the assembly of Longtan, Zen Master Chongxin, so he crossed mountains and rivers carrying his books to meet him. On his way he stopped to catch his breath and saw an old woman.

Deshan said to her, “What do you do?”

The old woman said, “I sell rice cakes.”

Deshan said, “Please sell me some.”

The old woman said, “What will you do with them, reverend?”

Deshan said, “I will eat them to refresh myself.”

The old woman said, “What are you carrying?”

Deshan said, “Haven’t you heard of me? I am Diamond King Chou. I specialize in the *Diamond Sutra*. There is no part of it I haven’t mastered. These are important commentaries on the sutra.”

The old woman said, “May I ask you a question?”

Deshan said, “Of course, ask me anything.”

The old woman said, “I was told that the *Diamond Sutra* says, ‘The past mind is ungraspable. The present mind is ungraspable. The future mind is ungraspable.’ With which mind will you satisfy your hunger with these cakes? If you can answer, I will give you some cakes. Otherwise, I will not.”

Dumbfounded, Deshan was unable to answer. The old woman flapped her sleeves and went away without giving Deshan any rice cakes.

How regrettable! The king of commentators, who wrote commentaries on hundreds of scrolls, a lecturer for decades, was so easily defeated by a humble old woman with a single question. There is great difference between those who have entered an authentic teacher's chamber and received transmission, and those who have not.

Deshan said to himself, "A painted rice cake does not satisfy hunger." He is now known as a dharma heir of Longtan.

Reflecting on this story, it is clear that Deshan had not clarified the matter. Even after meeting Longtan, he must have feared the old woman. He was an immature student and not an old buddha going beyond realization.

Although the old woman shut him up, we cannot say whether she was a person of true understanding. It is possible that she had heard of ungraspable mind and asked this question, thinking that mind is ineffable.

If Deshan had been fully awakened, he would have been able to respond and discern whether or not the old woman was a person of true understanding. But since Deshan was not yet Deshan, we do not know or see through the old woman's understanding.

Those who nowadays wear cloud robes and mist sleeves [monks], who laugh at Deshan for being unable to respond and praise the old woman for her brilliance, are foolish. We may doubt the old woman's understanding because, when Deshan could not answer, she could have said, "Reverend, you cannot answer my question. Ask me the same question and I will give you an answer." If she could have answered Deshan, it would have been clear that she was truly a person of realization.

Asking a question is not yet making a statement. There has never been a case since olden times where someone who said nothing was regarded as a person of realization.

Groundless self-proclamations are useless just as in the case of Deshan. Those who have not made a right statement should not be accepted, just as in the case of the old woman.

Try to speak for Deshan. When asked by the old woman, he should have said, "If so, don't sell me rice cakes." If he had done so, it would have been a sharp investigation of the way.

Deshan may ask the old woman, "The past mind is ungraspable. The present mind is ungraspable. The future mind is ungraspable. With which mind will you satisfy your hunger with these cakes?"

Then, the old woman should say, "Reverend, you only know that rice cakes satisfy your hunger. You don't know that mind satisfies the rice cakes' hunger, or that mind satisfies the mind's hunger."

If she says so, Deshan will try to find an answer.

At that moment, she should pick up three pieces of rice cake and offer them to Deshan. When Deshan moves to receive them, the old woman should say, "The past mind is ungraspable. The present mind is ungraspable. The future mind is ungraspable."

Again, Deshan may open his hand to receive the rice cakes. The old woman should pick one up, hit Deshan with it, and say, "A corpse with no spirit. Don't be dumbfounded."

If Deshan speaks upon hearing these words, it will be good. If not, the old woman should continue to say more. Merely flapping her sleeves and going away are not like holding a stinging bee inside the sleeves [is not sharp enough].

Deshan did not say to the old woman, "I cannot answer. Please speak for me." Thus, he did not say what he was supposed to say, and did not ask what he was supposed to ask.

What a pity! Deshan and the old woman's discussion on past mind and future mind has not been grasped by the future mind.

Deshan does not seem to have acquired clarity even after that. His actions were only coarse. As he studied with Longtan for a long time, he must have had occasion to break Longtan's head horn [surpass the teacher] and to receive the pearl from the gill [of the dragon]. But he only blew at a candle and was short of transmission of the lamp.

Accordingly, monks who study the way should always make a diligent effort. Those who take an easy path are not adequate. Those who make a diligent effort are buddha ancestors.

The inexhaustibility of mind is to buy a piece of painted rice cake and chew it up in a single bite.