

SELECTION FROM *JUST THIS IS IT: DONGSHAN AND THE PRACTICE OF SUCHNESS*

Taigen Dan Leighton (pp. 34-36)

*It Now Is Me; I Am Not It*

Probably the most pivotal and emblematic story about Dongshan occurred with his departure from Yunyan, rather than in their first meeting discussed in the previous chapter, which was concerned with nonsentient beings expressing Dharma. After some period of practice with Yunyan (its duration unspecified in extant records, as far as I know), just before departing to visit other teachers, Dongshan asked Yunyan, “Later on, if I am asked to describe your reality [or teaching], how should I respond?” After some pause, Yunyan said, “Just this is it.”

The narration states that Dongshan was then lost in thought, and Yunyan said, “You are now in charge of this great matter; you must be most thoroughgoing.” Dongshan departed without further comment. Later while wading across a stream, he looked down, saw his reflection, and “awakened to the meaning of the previous exchange.” He then wrote the following verse:

*Just don't seek from others, or you'll be far estranged from self.*

*I now go on alone; everywhere I meet it.*

*It now is me; I now am not it.*

*One must understand this way to merge with suchness.*

This story is highly revealing about the nature of this suchness, or reality, and also for the teaching about it. Yunyan’s “Just this is it” evokes meditative or mindfulness practices of bare attention from early Buddhism. “This” certainly might be envisioned in the context of their dialogue as referring simply to the presence together of Yunyan and Dongshan, that just the interactive presence of teacher and student is it. “This” might also refer to Dongshan’s directly prior inquiry, that the student’s asking about the teacher’s reality is the point. But “just this” also refers more universally to the simplicity and immediacy of reality here now, beyond human conceptualizations. Such a sterling utterance of the ultimate neither requires nor suggests any quick rejoinder from Dongshan, and none was forthcoming. But Yunyan sealed his conveyance of the Dharma to Dongshan by then saying, “You are now in charge of this great matter; you must be most thoroughgoing.”

Dongshan’s subsequent revelation upon gazing at his reflection in the stream presents an inner dynamic overcoming the familiar subject-object division, a primary hindrance to the apprehension of suchness. His verse response does not merely concern discerning a description of some external reality. Dongshan speaks to the complex dialectic that goes beyond the estrangement of self and other and integrates his personhood with the omnipresence of the reality of suchness. This reality is unavoidable: “Everywhere I meet it.” Saying, “Just don’t seek from others, or you’ll be far estranged from self,” Dongshan understands that he needs to realize this for himself, that Yunyan cannot just tell him this, or give it to him. Similarly, just hearing about this, the present reader does not automatically realize its import.

The provocative and profound key line that suggests the inner nature of this interrelationship is “It now is me, I now am not it.” This dynamic interaction may be viewed from many perspectives. Gazing at his reflection in the stream, Dongshan could see that this image was him, yet he could not be reduced to the representation in the water. The relationship of true reality to image, reflection, or depiction is at work in various ways here. These reflections are not themselves this ultimate reality, but suchness fully includes all images or depictions of it. Our experience of suchness and any expression of it can be in accord with suchness, but do not fully capture the suchness of the world.

The “it” of “just this” is totally inclusive, incorporating everything. So “it” truly was him, the totality of his being, yet he could not personally claim to encompass it all. This depicts the relationship of the limited “I,” including its egoistic self-clinging, to the all-encompassing universal nature, of which any individual “I” is simply a particular partial expression. This dialectic echoes the Huayan Fourfold Dharmadhatu with its development of the universal and particular, the mutual unobstructive interaction of universal and particular, and finally the mutual unobstructive interaction of particulars with “other” particulars. This dialectic between universal and particular would be developed as the Caodong five degrees teaching, introduced by Dongshan in his “Jewel Mirror Samadhi.” In that teaching poem, this line from Dongshan’s awakening verse celebrating the stream reflection, “It now is me; I now am not it,” would be echoed as “You are not it; it truly is you.”

This story helps illuminate the traditional Buddhist teaching of non-self and the issue of identity. Non-self, or *anatman* in Sanskrit, is one of the most fundamental Buddhist teachings. The Buddha declared that all selves are illusory constructions, not real as separate entities but mutually interdependent. Our attachments to our cherished self and its patterns of grasping and confusion obstructs seeing into deeper reality and the possibility of an awakened awareness that compassionately expresses the deep interconnection of oneself and supposed “others.” Dongshan’s “It now is me; I now am not it” provides a rich tapestry with which to look at the subtle interrelationship of this self with the wholeness of totality, of which the small self is an integral part. While “I now am not it” informs about the teaching of non-self, “It now is me” provides a deeper context for seeing the full reality in which we engage phenomena and have capacity to act responsibly.