

## **An Australian Koan The Master Song Man**

### Case

In Arnhem Land a singer named Maralung was asleep one night. As he was dreaming, a master song man from long ago came to him and said, "Wake up, I have a song to teach you." So Maralung woke up and the master taught him the song. Then Maralung went back to sleep and forgot the song. The next day a visitor said he would like to hear the song, so that night Maralung dreamed again and it happened the same way: The master came into his dream and woke him and taught him the song and again he fell asleep afterward. But this time in the morning he remembered the song.

Now here is the question: Maralung knew the difference between dream and waking. So, was the master song man really there or not?

(The following is from John Tarrant's book, "Bring Me the Rhinoceros," unless otherwise noted.)

### *FINDING YOUR SONG*

I have begun,  
When I am weary and can't decide the answer to a  
bewildering question

to ask my dead friends for their opinion  
and the answer is often immediate and clear.

- Marie Howe

### Pointer

If you ask whether you are awake or dreaming, the question itself makes life more interesting and resonant. A lot of things we do might be like finding a song to sing in a dream. If you want to solve a problem, your situation could be like the dreamer's in the koan. You don't have the song, and what's more, you are asleep. It all seems impossible. Then you notice something odd, and it makes you curious. There is an air of the uncanny and perhaps of danger, but you sense an opening and it makes you happy. This noticing is a kind of involuntary reaching out and when you reach out like this, without thought, your hand lights upon something. It turns out to be your song.

A song is a different way of communicating than, say, a memo. With our interesting problems – What about global warming? Should I get a divorce? How can I find a new job? – it's often not clear even where to begin. Problems start out looking to be either A or B and neither seems desirable. But if you see the problem from the back side or at another level, it may not be a problem anymore. That move is like finding a song. A song could also be the idea for a book, a solar energy panel, a way of helping a child in trouble – anything that you might want to bring into the world.

We don't expect the answers to our questions to come out of nothing. However that might be the only place a solution can come from. You start by not knowing – not knowing how or what or why or who – until that seems to be quite an acceptable place to spend time in. Then the strange thing is that if you reach out your hand, what you need might be there. This strangeness is at the same time encouraging and most disturbing.

### Commentary – on the koan

Maralung's story was told me [i.e. John Tarrant] by a musicologist from Sydney University, Allan Marett. Allen knew about Zen and Japanese music but had been studying the music in the Northern Territory. He recorded some of Maralung's songs and they are on the Web.

In a place called Barunga in the Northern Territory of Australia, there was a singer named Maralung. He took dance troupes around to traditional places. The ghost of a master song man called Balanjirri and a bird called Bunggridj-Bunggridj

gave Maralung his songs. The master song man lived so long ago that nothing of his life is known. In the outback you see mysterious moving lights, will-o'-the-wisps called Minmin; they are thought of as spirit lights and have their own creation stories and dreaming, but are considered to be dangerous.

One night Maralung was sleeping, watching a Minmin light. The light was blue and green and white and fell down across the sky from west to east. Balanjirri and the bird, Bunggridj-Bunggridj, appeared and set off after it. They followed the light and got a song there and then they came into the camp where Maralung was sleeping. Balanjirri said, "Get up, I have a song to teach you." The dreamer woke up and the master taught him the song. The bird sang too. The song was in the ghost language, so humans could sing it but only spirits could understand it. Maralung told the story:

He got those.....what do you call them.....corroboree sticks. They just appeared there. They were enormous those corroboree sticks. Oh ho, they were huge. That didgeridoo player, he sat down about as far from me as that bloody chair. Balanjirri called the didgeridoo player "son." It wasn't a short didgeridoo. It was enormous. And he played that didgeridoo right there for me.

"Don't lose this song, you keep this one," said the old song man. "I sang this song for you. It's yours." He spoke kindly like that.

"All right."

"OK, you've got to remember it properly, this good song, this Minmin light of yours."

He went back and I continued to sing after he'd left. But silly bugger, I fell asleep. But don't you worry, I'll get it. Maybe one or two, three, four, five.....if he shows me.....six, seven, eight, nine, that's it.

So the next night Maralung dreamed again and it happened the same way. Again the master and the bird came into his dream and woke him and sang for him and again he fell asleep afterward. But this time in the morning he remembered the song.

Now, here is the question. Maralung knew the difference between dream and waking. So, was the master song man really there or not?

#### Commentary – working with the koan

When you need something, and you don't quite know what you need, you can get more than you have asked for and be drawn into a larger, stranger world. The Minmin lights are dangerous; the bird and the ghost go to a place where there might be demons, but that's where you have to go to get a song – to a place that is beyond what you have ever known before. That danger and weirdness might be good for our lives.

For a long time I felt cut off from the world – my mind was not content or whole. The main symptom was of being shut out of the magic in things. I worried at the problems, studying animals and plants and noticing that all the steps I took did not help. Then one day the gap wasn't there anymore. After the gap disappeared, I could let a situation tell me what it was about, let people reveal themselves to me, without finding a problem. Sometimes wholeness is just given. So where does wholeness come from? Well that's one of the great questions. Where do we come from? Where does the universe come from? A ghost and a bird got it from the Minmin lights.

As I see it, the world arrives out of what is unknown and unimagined. Everything just appears as it is, coming towards us; it is a gift, not a product, and it stumbles over us, crashes into us, or comes to fetch us. I suppose it helps to show up without much going on in our minds. That's the discipline – the bit about not having much going on in our minds. It might be more accurate to say that it's not about whether there is something in the mind, but about whether we automatically believe our thoughts. However, having less going on in the mind helps us to be curious about our thoughts and to see the dreamlike nature of what we usually think is important. It's in the nature of imprisonment to believe that we are our thoughts. When we don't, freedom seems to have already arrived.

The way to cross a gap is to be curious, to wait with the conditions as they are and not to find fault with them. Rather than trying to wake ourselves up, we simply begin to pay attention in a deeper way and the waking up will happen on its own.

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“Since Maralung knew the difference between waking and dreaming, was the ancient song man really there or not?” I think we pretty much have to accept the form in which a question comes to us. Then we have to stay with the question. Any question that arises will open into others. The koan “No” (Jp. “Mu”) asks about human nature and whether it is the same as a dog’s, whether we have a share in the mystery of life. Whenever I really take on a question of this kind, it looks like a wall at first, but it turns out to have more interesting possibilities than I first thought. There is often something humbling about realizing this, the shallowness of my initial reaction. The wall usually turns out to be a gate.

Maralung went around from tiny place to tiny place, to little outback towns with a pub and a post office, to camps of bark lean-tos at river crossings. He would set up with his dance troupe and sing. Afterward, he would move on. Sometimes he painted houses for money. It seems to me a generous and consoling gesture to offer what you have without thought of how it will be received or what return the universe will give. That’s what the ghost, Balanjirri, did, and the bird too. There is a difference between singing under some eucalyptus trees at a river crossing in the Northern Territory, and being on stage at the Sydney Opera House, but we can’t say that the difference is always in favor of the Sydney Opera House. What makes a human life real and beautiful is available in every place. An insubstantial and alienated life – eating a hearty breakfast of a cardboard photo of corn flakes – is always on offer but its consolations are not consoling. In order to embrace a handmade life, you do have to be willing to deal with Minmin lights along with awe and fear. But you have to deal with awe and fear anyway, and when you pay attention, a continual turning toward the genuine just happens.

We can’t say that human lives have a purpose, since a purpose would be smaller than we are. It’s true though, that the impulse to give freely to the world seems to be at the bottom of the well of human intentions where the purest and clearest water arises. To be able to offer back what the world has given you, but shaped a little by your touch – that makes a true life. Eventually we find our song and remember it and sing it. And we can never know who else will sing the song, or how the story will turn out in the end; its ripples widen beyond us and there is no end in sight.