

53. Yuanji Knocks the Body Down

CHINA, EIGHTH CENTURY

WHEN MASTER YUANJUE was about to die on Mount Wutai, he said to the monks around him, "I've heard of masters passing away while sitting or lying down, but have any died while standing?"

"Yes, some," they replied.

"What about upside down?" asked Yuanjue.

"No, we have never heard of such a thing," they said.

Yuanjue stood on his head and died, and his robes continued to drape his body in a dignified manner. The monks decided it was time to take his body to be cremated but it was as immovable as a stone pillar. People from near and far came to marvel at the amazing sight.

Yuanjue's younger sister, the nun Yuanji, came to the place. She scolded: "Older brother! When you were alive you flouted the laws of the Dharma, and even now that you're dead, you're still causing problems and making a nuisance of yourself."

She gave the body a little push and it toppled to the ground. Then the monks took the body to be cremated.

MELISSA MYOZEN BLACKER'S REFLECTION

In Zen practice, we emphasize a delight in paradox and an energetic love of life lived fully. My teachers always encouraged me to be both spacious and suspicious about anything I thought was true, and I continue to encourage my students to go beyond their conventional ideas

about the nature of reality. This can lead to becoming a person. koan tells the tale of two exceptions of the story they are a sister and are wonderfully fresh and alive. ordinary understanding, even

The brother in this story, Yuanjue, is a death defier. He wants his death to be a statement to all human beings—many of us have a desire to stand out in a crowd, to do something no one else has done. We are known for our uniqueness. Of course, this is completely unique—there is no one else like us. Our special qualities can get us stuck in a rut. It is difficult for everyone, especially our leaders, to thumbing his nose at the conventional. Yuanjue is not a simple narcissist. What he is doing is that this upside-down death is a statement into the magic of emptiness, where we are alive with possibility. He has entered the upside-down kingdom. What is he going to do with such an absurd situation? Emptiness, cannot be moved. This is

When we have had an opening into the world of opposites, we can get stuck in a rut. "Emptiness" and it can last for some time. It can be turned down. There are no consequences. Equanimity, and the precept of non-attachment, can go right out the window. We can feel free and wild.

I love this story because it is a statement of opening to emptiness and the possibility of a new beginning. I can remember my early days of being turned topsy-turvy for me. Not

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about the nature of reality. This attitude of freedom from convention can lead to becoming a person who enjoys making trouble, and this koan tells the tale of two excellent Zen troublemakers. In this version of the story they are a sister and a brother, Yuanji and Yuanjue. They are wonderfully fresh and alive in their commitment to playing with ordinary understanding, even in the face of death.

The brother in this story, Yuanjue, is a particular kind of troublemaker. He wants his death to be special. This is not unusual for us human beings—many of us have a similar desire to stand out from the crowd, to do something no one else has done. We want to be seen and known for our uniqueness. Of course everything each one of us does is completely unique—there is no need to prove this. But insisting on our special qualities can get us into a lot of trouble, making life difficult for everyone, especially ourselves. The brother dies upside down, thumbing his nose at the convention of ordinary death. But Yuanjue is not a simple narcissist. When we look more closely, we can see that this upside-down death is a representation of Yuanjue's insight into the magic of emptiness, where mountains dance and everything is alive with possibility. He had penetrated ordinary reality, and had entered the upside-down kingdom of awakening. But what are we going to do with such an absurd declaration? His body, stuck in emptiness, cannot be moved. This creates a real problem for everyone.

When we have had an opening into nonduality, the coming together of opposites, we can get stuck there. Some teachers call this "Zen sickness" and it can last for some time. Everything is empty and upside down. There are no consequences to what we do. Wisdom, compassion, equanimity, and the precepts, all the long-developed fruits of Zen practice, can go right out the window. We become "Dharma bums" and feel free and wild.

I love this story because it so beautifully illustrates the limitations of opening to emptiness and the danger of getting stuck in that awareness. I can remember my early days practicing Zen where everything turned topsy-turvy for me. Nothing was impossible, and I was heady

with delight in the magical quality of life. Zhaozhou's "oak tree in the garden" made me giddy with identity with oak trees. I literally went around, for a blessedly brief period, hugging and kissing trees. Standing on my head to die would have been business as usual. It took many more years of practice to get my feet back on the ground.

Even if we have never had such an opening, we can become stuck in theories and ideas about freedom, believing that nothing we do has any consequences. Whether we are stuck in a genuine experience of emptiness, or we are convinced that we know what the awakened life should be like, we can become quite dangerous to others and to ourselves.

Halfway through the koan, when her brother's body becomes "as immovable as a stone pillar," Yuanji takes over. She is not stuck in emptiness but has entered the more mature view, where all apparent dualities are seen through, and life becomes much simpler. Many Zen teachings set us up to compare opposites (form and emptiness, life and death, special and ordinary, male and female, brother and sister) and then topple down our ideas about any separation between them, as Yuanji topples her brother's body down to the ground. The wise sister has no patience with her brother's emptiness-oriented death. His upside-down-ness is playful, but it also demonstrates the limitation of this intoxicating period of opening: no one can move his body. His sister comes along and knows exactly how to rebalance emptiness and form. With a quick shove, she sets things right again, and her brother can be buried. She is the kind of troublemaker who speaks truth to power, who says it like it is. Such clarity and balance save us all.

It's so important, in our own lives, to enjoy the freedom of emptiness, but never to ignore the consequences of form. There is no death, and we all die. There is no male or female, and only women can give birth to a child. Living an awakened life is not so complicated. We get up in the morning, go to the bathroom, get dressed, and do our work. There is nothing special. And in this "nothing special," everything shines with its own light.

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What can one learn by looking at the world upside-down?
 What can very old friends and relatives offer even to enlightened
 people that others cannot offer?

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