

SENGCAN'S TRUSTING THE MIND

Introduction

This poem is a series of epigrams. The Chinese call them *ming* 銘. Like the epigrams of ancient Greece, they consist of couplets that can stand alone or be linked together. And like their Mediterranean counterparts, they were inscribed rather than spoken or sung. They were embroidered, carved, or written on all sorts of things—their salient feature being a few pithy phrases that conveyed something worth keeping in mind, and usually they rhymed.

Despite its antiquity and widespread use, the *ming* never played an important role among China's literary forms. Simply put, its diction was that of a greeting card. Most of those that have survived haven't survived because of their content but because of their connection with their author or the object on which they were inscribed. The ones that make up this poem are an exception. Among the tens of thousands that have been preserved, these are the only epigrams people in China—and not only in China—still read and ponder. They're an essential part of Zen instruction around the world and a good example of how a teaching that eschews the use of language to convey its message uses language.

Their author was a monk named Sengcan 僧璨. When he was over forty, he became a disciple of Huike, Zen's Second Patriarch. After the death of Bodhidharma, Huike remained in North China until 574, when there was a purge of Buddhist monks and nuns to expand a new dynasty's tax base. Hitherto tax-exempt monks and nuns were forced to return to lay life or be killed. Huike fled south, all the way to the remote slopes of Sikongshan 司空山, just north of the Yangzi. Sengcan was among those who followed him there.

The persecution of Buddhist clerics ended with the founding of a new dynasty, the Sui, in 581, and Huike returned north. But before he did, he designated Sengcan his dharma heir, making him Zen's Third Patriarch. That was in 583. After his teacher's departure, Sengcan remained on Sikongshan. But while the mountain was a

good place to hide, it wasn't a good place to teach. Even today it sees few visitors. Sengcan finally ended his seclusion in 590 and took up residence at Shangu Temple 山谷寺. It was only a few days walk away, and it was at the foot of Tianzhushan 天柱山, the most sacred mountain in the entire Yangzi watershed. It should have been a good place to teach. But it was a Daoist mountain, not a Buddhist one, and Sengcan attracted only one disciple that we know of: a twelve-year-old boy who showed up at the monastery in 592.

Sengcan gave the boy the name Daoxin 道信. Ten years later, Sengcan made him his dharma heir and Zen's Fourth Patriarch. Then he left with some Daoist friends for the distant mountain of Luofushan 羅浮山, not far from what is now Hong Kong. Living near Tianzhushan, Sengcan had developed an interest in more than Daoist terminology. He suffered from rheumatism, and no place was more famous for elixirs than Luofushan.

By the time Sengcan returned two years later, Daoxin had left on his own journey—a journey that would result in the establishment of China's first Zen monastery and the self-supporting way of life that would form the basis of Chinese Zen. The elixirs notwithstanding, Sengcan died three years later in 606. His body was at first preserved at Shangu Temple. People in those days thought the preserved bodies of spiritual teachers had magic powers. Eventually, the magic wore out, and his body was cremated in 745 and the ashes placed inside a stupa. The stupa is still there, on top of the hill behind the original monastery. Inscribed on its base is *Trusting the Mind*, or *Xinxinming* 信心銘, the poem that has been associated with Sengcan ever since.

I considered translating it half a dozen times. The language is so simple. It begs to be translated. And it has. No Zen text has been translated more. I would be surprised if there weren't over a dozen versions in English alone—and many more that never made it into print. Normally, I wouldn't consider adding to an already crowded field. But whenever I've read the text, I've wanted to combine the couplets differently, differently from how I did the previous time I read the text or differently from how others—including Chinese commentators—combined them. The reason for this is that the *Xinxinming* is made up of rhymed couplets that don't necessarily rhyme

anymore. The pronunciation of Chinese has changed. Hence, reading the text today, it's unclear which couplets go with which others. Are they quatrains or something else?

A solution finally presented itself when I learned that there was a pronunciation dictionary compiled around 590 called *Exegesis of the Language of the Classics* 經典釋文 and a rhyming dictionary published in 601 called *Comparison of Rhymes* 切韻. Using these two books and their successors, as well as the recent work of such scholars as Bernard Karlgren¹⁶⁰ and Baxter and Sagart,¹⁶¹ I was finally able to see that the couplets that comprise the *Xinxinming* not only form standard two-couplet quatrains, they also form longer stanzas of three, four, six, even eight couplets, and there is no longer a single couplet at the end in search of a rhyming pair, which had always puzzled me—and no doubt others.

In the translation that follows, I have indicated in bold the first line for each set of rhymes. It is still a single, continuous poem with a singular focus, but the different rhymes suggest, if nothing else, that it wasn't composed at one go but over time and with shifts of emphasis.

As for the poem's meaning, if Sengcan had been present at the gathering in Vimalakirti's house, I can imagine him quoting a few of these couplets in response to the layman's request for examples of nonduality. That is what this poem is about: "Two exist because of one, let one go as well."

160. Bernard Karlgren, *Grammata Serica Recensa* (1957).

161. William Baxter and Laurent Sagart, *Old Chinese Reconstruction, Version 1.1*.

Trusting the Mind

The Way isn't hard to find¹⁶²

just avoid choosing
when preferences are gone
it's perfectly clear
the slightest distinction
parts heaven and earth
to find it right now
stop taking sides.

Fighting over sides

is an illness of the mind
until you understand the mystery
you still your thoughts in vain.

It's perfect like the Void¹⁶³

nothing missing nothing extra
because you grab and throw away
it doesn't look like that to you.

Don't chase dependent things¹⁶⁴

don't settle for emptiness either
in all-embracing oneness
everything disappears completely.

Staying still and trying not to move

you end up moving more
why be trapped in dualities
realize opposites are the same
not knowing they're the same
you waste your time either way
denying existence or nonexistence
you trade one emptiness for another
the more you think or talk
the less sense you make
once you stop thinking and talking

there's nothing that isn't clear
returning to the root you find the meaning
chasing the light you end up confused
reflect on this right now
better now than before it's all empty.¹⁶⁵

Whatever happens before it's all empty

comes from deluded views
no need to look for the truth
just put an end to views.

Don't cling to dualities

and don't seek them out
once a yes or no appears
confusion clouds the mind.

Two exist because of one

let one go as well
as long as no thought arises
nothing is wrong with anything.

Nothing wrong and no things

no thoughts and no thinking
the actor disappears with the stage
the stage disappears with the actor.

The stage exists because of the actor

the actor exists because of the stage
realize both of them

are one and the same emptiness
one emptiness containing two¹⁶⁶
altogether ten thousand things
if you don't distinguish fine or coarse
how can you be biased?

The Way at heart is all-embracing

it isn't hard or easy
those with doubts or narrow minds
take longer the more they try.

Grab it and you lose perspective

you're sure to go astray
let it be the way it is
it doesn't leave or stay.

Accepting your nature being one with the Way

you'll know no discontent
controlling your thoughts opposing the truth
you'll sink into negativity.

Exhausting yourself in negativity

what use is leaving home¹⁶⁷
regardless of the path you take
give the dust of sensation no thought.

Giving the dust of sensation no thought

this is the same as enlightenment
the wise do nothing
fools become entangled
nothing differs from anything else
but deluded people love to cling
objectifying the mind to cultivate the mind
what a great mistake
peace and disorder arise from delusion
enlightenment includes neither bad nor good
each and every duality
is due to measures or scales
why bother trying to grab
a dream an illusion a flower in the sky¹⁶⁸
profit and loss right and wrong
let them go right now.

When you're no longer asleep

dreams vanish by themselves
when you don't differentiate
everything is real.

What is real at heart is a mystery

be quiet and forget about reasons
view everything the same
return to letting things be.

When reasons are gone

what use are examples
be still and movement ceases
move and stillness ends
if neither is right

how can one be good?

Go beyond all limits

don't follow patterns or rules

focus on equanimity

stop whatever you're doing

get rid of lingering doubts

put your trust in samadhi

let nothing at all remain

nothing that leaves a trace

let the empty light shine

don't try to exert your mind

this isn't the domain of reason

much less perception or feeling.

In the Dharma Realm of Suchness¹⁶⁹

neither self nor other exists

if you're ready right now

just say "not two."

Not two is all-inclusive

there is nothing it doesn't contain

the sages of every world

all achieve this understanding.

An understanding that transcends time

a thought that lasts ten thousand years

there is nowhere it isn't present

wherever you look it's there.

It's smaller than small and bigger than big

forget dimensions and states

it's bigger than big and smaller than small

don't look for boundaries or edges

it exists but doesn't

it doesn't but does

what isn't like this

you have to let go.

It's one and all things

it's all things and one

if you can be like this

why care you're not done.¹⁷⁰

Trust the mind free of dualities

free of dualities trust the mind
it's where language can't go
it's not past future or present.

162. When Buddhism arrived in China, *Dharma* was often translated by *Dao*.

163. Another Daoist term, *Taixu* 太虛 was depicted as a circle containing nothing, which was the Daoist view of nonduality, before yin and yang.

164. According to Buddhists, things exist only in relation to other things. Thus, they are empty, empty of self-existence.

165. I've interpreted 前空 "before emptiness" as referring to the Indian notion of cosmic time whereby this kalpa will be followed by an empty one.

166. "One gives birth to two, two give birth to three (yin, yang, and their mixture), three give birth to the ten thousand things" (Daodejing 42).

167. A person who becomes a Buddhist monk or nun leaves their family and chooses among the sravaka, pratyekabuddha, or bodhisattva paths.

168. A metaphor derived from looking at things with cataract-clouded eyes.

169. Buddhists use the term "suchness" *bhutatathata* for what is real. The "Dharma Realm" includes all possible realities, provisional or ultimate.

170. Bodhisattvas aren't done until they liberate all beings.