

## MOSHAN'S NATURE OF THE SUMMIT MOUNTAIN

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### KOANS OF THE WAY OF REALITY

#### *Main Case*

ZEN MASTER MOSHAN was a student of Gaoan Dayu. Once, the monastic Guanzhi arrived at Mount Mo and said, "If there is someone here who is worthy, I'll stay here; if not I'll overturn the meditation platform."<sup>1</sup> He then entered the hall. Moshan sent her attendant to query the visitor, saying, "Reverend, are you here sightseeing, or have you come seeking the Buddhadharma?" Guanzhi said, "I seek the dharma."

So Moshan sat upon the dharma seat in the abbess' room and Guanzhi entered for dokusan. Moshan said, "Reverend, where have you come from today?"<sup>2</sup> Guanzhi said, "From the intersection on the main road." Moshan said, "Why don't you remove your sunhat?" Guanzhi didn't answer for some time. Finally, he removed his hat and bowed, saying, "What is the nature of Mount Mo?" Moshan said, "The summit is not revealed." Guanzhi said, "Who is the master of Mount Mo?" Moshan said, "It does not have the form of female or male." Guanzhi shouted, "Ho!" and then he said, "Why doesn't it transform itself?"<sup>3</sup> Moshan said, "It is not a god or a demon, so what would it change itself into?"

Guanzhi then became Moshan's disciple and worked as her head gardener for three years.

Later he said to his assembly, "I received half a ladle full at Papa Linji's place and half a ladle full at Mama Moshan's. Since I took that drink, I've never been thirsty."

*Commentary*

When Guanzhi arrived at Master Moshan's place, he was carrying a belly-full of Linji's Zen. Moshan was an adept. She knew how to free what is stuck and loosen what is bound. She asked, "Are you sightseeing, or have you come seeking the Buddhadharmā?" When Guanzhi said he was seeking the dharma, she lost no time in taking the high seat in the abbess' room. Her first question and the monastic's answer clearly established host and guest. Tell me, how were host and guest established?

Master Moshan then walked right into his belly, saying, "Why don't you take off your sunhat?" Guanzhi was silent for some time. Later, Fushan said of this, "The battle began right here." Do you understand Fushan's meaning? Finally Guanzhi removed his hat and bowed, saying, "What is the nature of Mount Mo?" The master answered, "The summit is not revealed." What is the meaning of "the summit is not revealed"? If you can say a word here, you're halfway to understanding Master Moshan's teaching.

Guanzhi then said, "Who is the master of Mount Mo?" Moshan said, "It does not have the form of female or male." In actual fact, it can also be said that neither does it have the form of both female and male. Or neither female nor male. This being the case, what is the master of Mount Mo? Say a word. Guanzhi shouted, "Ho!" and then said, "Why doesn't it transform itself?" Although Guanzhi's shout showed some life, he nevertheless sank up to his nostrils in a bog when he said, "Why doesn't it transform itself?" At this point Moshan should have run his smart ass out of there with her staff and let him go on his deluded way. Moshan, however, was compassionate and said, "It's not a god or a demon, so what would it change itself into?" That is, how could it change itself? Guanzhi got it, and then became Moshan's disciple and worked hard as her head gardener for three years.

Later, when he was teaching, he said to his own assembly, "I received half a ladle full at Papa Linji's place and half a ladle full at Mama Moshan's place. Since I took that drink, I've never been thirsty." I say, Bah! Still, it all comes down to only half a ladle full. Do you understand?

### *Capping Verse*

The summit is not revealed, not even a shadow.  
Neither female nor male; how can you approach it?  
Dropping off the skin bag, casting off the mask of red flesh  
directly,  
The nose is vertical, the eyes horizontal.

Moshan lived around 800 A.D., the Golden Age of Zen in China. She was a contemporary of another famous woman teacher of those times, Iron Grindstone Liu, successor of Master Yangshan. Other significant Zen figures of that era were Guishan, Linji, Dongshan, Deshan, and Zhaozhou, a worthy company of sages.

In her name, “mo” means “summit” and “shan” means “mountain.” Moshan literally translates into English as “Summit Mountain.” She was a disciple of Dayu and the first woman dharma heir to be noted in the official Zen transmission records. Miriam Levering, who has translated Moshan’s records and teachings, writes that Moshan was the first nun to be portrayed in Zen texts as taking up formal training activities traditionally reserved for male teachers. She was an abbess of a monastery and had a group of loyal students. She was a challenging and demanding teacher. There is a chapter dedicated to Moshan in the Record of the Transmission of the Lamp, a compilation of stories about Chinese Zen masters, written in 1004 A.D.

Moshan was not the first woman to receive the Zen mind-to-mind transmission, though. That distinction is attributed to Nun Zongchi, one of Bodhidharma’s four disciples and successors. But there’s not much written about Zongchi, and there is quite a bit known about Moshan.

Moshan’s teacher Dayu received the mind-to-mind seal from Guishan, who in turn was a student of Master Mazu, the seminal Zen figure of that period. Dayu, who lived most of his life as a mountain hermit, was also the teacher directly responsible for bringing Master Linji to his enlightenment. Linji, a young monastic, was in the congregation of Master Huangbo. He studied there for three years but was reluctant to engage Huangbo face-to-face. One day, the head monastic, noticing his reserve, said, “You’ve been here a while already and you haven’t been to dokusan.

Why don't you go?" Linji responded, "I don't know what to ask." The head monastic advised, "Just ask him 'What is the truth?'" Linji, being a good student, went in and before he even finished asking the question, Huangbo slugged him. He went back to the meditation hall. Later, the head monastic queried Linji, "What happened?" and Linji reported, "Well, he hit me." The head monastic said, "Then go back and ask him again. Be persistent." Linji went back and got hit a second time; then a third time. Finally, a bit flustered, he exclaimed, "I'm not going to stay here, I'm leaving." As he was about to depart, Huangbo advised him, "Why don't you go see hermit Dayu. Maybe he will be able to clarify this matter for you." On finding Dayu, Linji immediately told him what happened with Huangbo, "Three times I asked him what is the essential meaning of the Buddha's teaching, and three times he hit me. I don't know whether I was at fault or not." Dayu listened carefully, then exclaimed, "Old Huangbo is such a grandmother that he has utterly exhausted himself with your trouble. And now you've come here asking whether you're at fault or not." At these words, Linji attained great enlightenment. After this encounter with Dayu, Linji returned to Huangbo's monastery and continued his training there, eventually receiving transmission from Huangbo.

The monastic Guanzhi, the other person appearing in this koan, had already studied with Linji. At their first encounter, when Linji saw him coming, he grabbed Guanzhi by his vestments. Guanzhi yelled, "I understand, I understand." Linji released him and said, "I'll spare you a blow." Guanzhi stayed and became Linji's disciple.

This meeting with Moshan took place after Guanzhi left Linji and was doing his pilgrimage, which was a traditional aspect of Zen at the time. At one point in his travels, he came upon Moshan's place. When he arrived at Mount Mo, he proclaimed, *If there is someone here who is worthy, I'll stay here; if not I'll overturn the meditation platform.*

I added footnotes to this koan. The footnote to Guanzhi's challenge says, "The stink of Linji is all over him." The beginning of the commentary makes a similar point. It declares, *When Guanzhi arrived at Master Moshan's place, he was carrying a belly-full of Linji's Zen.* Linji's Zen is the shout, the thrusting of the staff or the fist, the hit. It is Zen teaching filled with the dynamics of confrontation, smashing, turning things over.

This style was actually initiated by Mazu. He passed it on to Huangbo and Huangbo transmitted it on to Linji, who perfected it. It continued in the Linji school down to the present time. Linji practitioners are very fond of shouts and blows, and a stout posture.

The commentary continues, *Moshan was an adept. She knew how to free what is stuck and loosen what is bound.* What was stuck and what was bound with Guanzhi? Essentially, she was asking Guanzhi, "What are your provisions? What have you got to offer?" Forget about imitating Linji; forget about imitating your teacher; forget about quoting the scriptures. How do you understand the dharma? How do you manifest the dharma? If we can't realize and actualize the dharma for ourselves, we'd all become clones of the Buddha, and that's not what the teaching is about. Moshan asked, *Are you sightseeing or have you come seeking the Buddhadharma?* Good question. Zen is not a spectator sport. You can't just watch. You can't remain on the sidelines. You have to either do it or leave it—one or the other. *When Guanzhi said that he was seeking the dharma, she took no time in taking the high seat in the abbess' room.* "I seek the dharma" is a powerful statement for a teacher to hear. It calls up in a genuine teacher a life of vow and commitment. It's like a hound dog picking up a scent. It's an all-encompassing imperative, not some decision. But it should be understood that just to hear that declaration, "I've come for the dharma," does not mean that the teaching can yet take place, or that a teacher-student relationship exists. It just means that the student is asking and the teacher is prepared to respond.

*[Moshan's] first question and the monastic's answer clearly established host and guest.* Her first question, *Reverend, where have you come from today?* His answer, *From the intersection on the main road.* This sets up "host and guest." "Host and guest" is Linji's teaching on the relationship that exists between two people. Linji expounded this as "the fourfold host and guest." The host seeing the host; the host seeing the guest; the guest seeing the host; the guest seeing the guest. So tell me, in what way were host and guest established? If you want to understand this koan, you must have some insight into this. Moshan said, *Reverend, where have you come from today?* The footnote says, "Don't mistake this for casual conversation." It's not. The question she was asking was a profound question. She was probing. Who are you? What's

your understanding? Where are you coming from in your view of reality? What is your Dharma?

*Master Moshan then walked right into his belly.* Once she saw where he was coming from, she saw where the gaps were and proceeded to close them. The gaps are the separation, the distancing we create with our minds. She said, *Why don't you take off your sunhat?* What does this have to do with anything? What kind of question is that? There is a protocol of entering and leaving a monastery, of approaching and departing from a teacher. Breaking that protocol can be an expression of the dharma. It can also be stupidity or just plain rudeness.

If you were to concentrate on the key point of this koan using the *hua-to* method, it would be very easy to miss the subtleties. It is easy to focus on the pivotal exchange: *What's the nature of Mount Mo? The summit's not revealed.* But there is much more depth to be explored. The whole encounter is essential to understanding what's happening here. There are other teachings to appreciate when you're thorough and go deeper.

Guanzhi was sassing Moshan. He was toying with her right from the beginning, *If there's someone worthy I'll stay; if not I'll turn over the meditation seat.* She challenged it. *Are you sightseeing or have you come seeking the Buddhadharma?* He said, *The dharma.* So she took him seriously and immediately went to the dokusan room. She wanted to see what he was made of. And she found out—not much. There were gaps. He was stuck. She kept up her probing, *Why don't you take off your sunhat?* If you are authentic in your asking for the teachings, take off that hat, open up your bowing mat, and prostrate yourself properly to the teacher. That shows that you're ready, that you're a student who comes for the dharma. When she said, *Why don't you take off your sunhat?* *Guanzhi was silent for some time.* What was that moment about—a hesitation, doubt, reflection, confusion? *Later, Fushan said of this, "The battle began right here." Do you understand Fushan's meaning?* The battle is the dharma encounter. Why is it that it began at this juncture? This is where the firm lines were established. Guanzhi hesitated and then finally removed his hat and bowed. The teaching could begin.

Guanzhi's bow is a critical point. His ears now can hear; the eyes can see. The heart can feel; the mind is open. A student is born. If that didn't happen, all she could have said was, "Go away. I'm not your teacher." He

bowed and asked, *What is the nature of Mount Mo?* What is the nature of Moshan? What is the nature of Daido? He was asking, "What is the truth? Who are you? What is life? What is death? What is the ultimate nature of reality?" These are all religious questions. They can only be answered through practice and realization. Practice and realization are not about knowledge, information, or belief. They are about practice and realization, about making something real. *What is the nature of Mount Mo?* Moshan answered, *The summit is not revealed.* The summit of the mystic peak is never revealed.

What is the summit of the Heavenly Light Mountain, the dharma name for Mount Tremper? Have you seen it? The way to the top is steep and strewn with boulders. Those who get there are few. When you finally arrive, when you get to the peak of this mountain, you go deaf, dumb, and blind. Do you understand? That's why it's not revealed. *What is the meaning of "the summit is not revealed"?* If you can say a word here you're halfway to understanding Master Moshan's teaching. Though not revealed, throughout all time the summit is right before your eyes.

Guanzhi continued, *Who is the master of Mount Mo?* Moshan replied, *It does not have the form of female or male.* It's not what you think it is. He was falling back to the position of "Should I remove my hat? Is anybody worthy?" Having come this far, he was still being dragged down by his old habits, not being able to see the Buddha right in front of his eyes because of her gender. Or because she didn't act the way Linji acted. Guanzhi thought the dharma had to have a particular quality. Consciously or unconsciously, we all hold onto a similar notion. It's called expectation. It's called preconceived ideas. It's another kind of blindness, the blindness of delusion.

Moshan answered, *It does not have the form of female or male.* It's not what you think it is. In actual fact, it can be said further that neither does it have the form of both female and male or of neither female nor male. Not female, not male, not both, not neither—then what is it? If you work on this koan, you have to present something at this point. You have to show something that's alive and true. *This being the case, what is the master of Mount Mo?* Don't describe, show me! Forget rationalizations and explanations and go directly to the truth of the matter. Express the inexpressible. How do you express the inexpressible? *Guanzhi shouted*

"Ho!" Bah! Get that stink of Linji out of here and show me some of your own provisions.

Following his shout, Guanzhi asked, *Why doesn't it transform itself?* This added stupidity to clarity. For a moment, it seemed as though he was seeing something. That shout could have indicated an opening. The footnote to this says, "He deserves thirty blows of the staff. Why is she being so kind to him?" Having reached this point, having received four direct and clear responses, he still came up with this stupid question, *Why doesn't it transform itself?* It echoes the exchange between Shariputra and the goddess from the "Vimalakirti Sutra." The goddess appeared in Vimalakirti's house, joining all the bodhisattvas who gathered there. She performed all sorts of fantastic and magical feats. Witnessing her powers, Shariputra said to her, "What prevents you from transforming yourself out of your female state?" The goddess answered, "Although I have sought my female state for these past twelve years, I have still not found it. If a magician were to incarnate a woman by magic, would you ask her, 'What prevents you from transforming yourself out of your female state?'" Shariputra responded, "No, such a woman would not really exist, so what would there be to transform?" The goddess said, "Just so, venerable Shariputra, all things do not really exist." The goddess then exchanged form with Shariputra, so he found himself in a woman's body and she was in his body. Then she said, "Now, what prevents you from transforming out of your female state?" Shariputra said, "I don't know what to transform." The goddess said, "In all things there is neither male nor female, nor is there an end to male and female. Where do you find yourself?" This happened at the time of the Buddha. And here it is in this koan, thirteen hundred years later, and the same confusion creeps into this encounter. It needs to be restated again and again, over and over. The non-dual dharma needs to be reaffirmed by each generation, constantly. It needs to be practiced by each generation. It needs to be realized and actualized, again and again and again and again.

Although Guanzhi's shout showed some life, he nevertheless sank to his nostrils in a bog when he said, "Why doesn't it transform itself?" *At this point Moshan should have run his smart ass out of there with her staff and let him go on his deluded way.* She should have given him a little bit of Linji's food that he seemed to love so much. Hit him. But that



wasn't her style. Moshan, however, was compassionate and said, "It's not a god or a demon, so what would it change itself into?" That is, how could it change itself? Guanzhi [finally] got it. Got what? What did he get? What do you get? He then became Moshan's disciple and worked hard as her head gardener for three years. Later, when he was teaching, he said to his own assembly, "I received half a ladle full at Papa Linji's place and half a ladle full at Mama Moshan's place. Since I took that drink, I've never been thirsty." But, for all his efforts, this still comes down to only half a ladle full. Do you understand? If he got half from Linji and half from Moshan, why is it still only a half?

The capping verse: *The summit is not revealed, not even a shadow. Neither female nor male, how can you approach it?* What is that which is neither male nor female? Where is the truth of the summit of the mountain not revealed? How do you approach it? The next line tells you. *Dropping off the skin bag, casting away the mask of red flesh directly, the nose is vertical, the eyes horizontal.* The nose is vertical, the eyes horizontal is one of Master Dogen's famous phrases. When he came back from China, after studying there with Jujing and receiving the transmission, someone asked him, "What did you learn? What did you bring back?" He said, "I have nothing. I only know that my nose is vertical and my eyes are horizontal." Does his response mean that there is nothing or does it mean that there is something, and if it means that there is something, what is that something? What is that fact of life that the nose is vertical and the eyes horizontal? This is called the dharma of thusness. The dharma of thusness is not to be found in form nor is it to be found in emptiness. The truth is not to be found in one side or the other side. It's not to be found in both and it's not to be found in neither. Then where is it to be found? What is the truth? What is that place that is not one side and not the other side? We refer to it as "two arrows meeting in mid-air," or as "the foot before and the foot behind in walking." We speak of it in terms of light within darkness, darkness within light—the merging of opposites. What does that all come down to? What has it got to do with your life? How can it free us of pain and suffering? It's all contained in that truth. We should not take it lightly.

A Song dynasty poet wrote a stanza in praise of Moshan. It's recorded in a classic Zen text called "The Venerable Ancient Teachers." It says:

Moshan does not reveal its pure summit,  
but throughout all time the peak is before the eyes.  
It's said it has no male or female form,  
but does distinguish the lotus amidst the fire.  
Without form, without mind, without intention,  
becoming male or female just accords with conditions.  
These times are replete with monastics and lay practitioners,  
each one shines with flawless radiance.

## NOTES

1. The stink of Linji is all over him.
2. Don't mistake this for casual conversation.
3. He deserves thirty blows of the staff. Why is she being so kind to him?