

An
Incident
at
Wang-Mei Shan

Imagine, if you will, the silent temple compound at Wang-mei Shan, bathed, perhaps, in the limpid luminescence of the full midnight moon. For some time the monastic community, quiescent by custom, has felt the touch of a deeper sobriety. Soon the aging master, Hung-jen (601–74 C.E.), will pass beyond the anguish of this world. The master's successor, as Hung-jen has declared, will be the monk who composes the most insightful *gāthā*. And everyone expects the scholarly and respected Shen-hsiu (605?–706 C.E.) to be capable of superlatively penetrating insight. Everyone, that is, with the possible exception of Shen-hsiu himself. Shen-hsiu has, indeed, written a very fine *gāthā*, a verse which will win the adulation of the master. Yet he is troubled by doubt. Stealing into Hung-jen's quarters, he affixes the following, anonymously, to the wall:

Body is the Bodhi Tree,
The mind a stand of mirror bright.
Take care to wipe it continually,
Allowing no dust to cling.¹

Even before the mountain mist begins to glow in the first timid blush of morning light, the master arises. The dreamless curtain of sleep parting his mind only

moments earlier, Hung-jen discovers the lovely verse, and in reverence for its insight summons his disciples. Incense is burned before it, and the community is admonished that enlightenment will unfailingly be attained by whoever should put the gāthā into practice. One monk, we may imagine, is inwardly delighted. Others, guessing the author of the verse, are warmly satisfied.

There is one, however, no doubt deeply inspired by the verse, whose remarkable insight plumbs deeper still. Hui-neng (638–713 C.E.), occasionally described by the tradition (though not without evident paradox) as an “illiterate” kitchen-helper from “the South” (perhaps Canton, or perhaps even farther south, Vietnam),² composes the following verse, tacks the gāthā anonymously beside its mate, and returns to his quarter in silence beneath the enigmatic half-smile of the onlooking full moon.

There never was a Bodhi Tree,
Nor bright mirror-stand.
Originally, not one thing exists,
So where is the dust to cling?³

Rising long before the earth begins to quiver and dance in the curious intruding beams of the sun’s light, Hung-jen, a subdued flush of recognition rising to his eyes, summons Hui-neng to the Master’s quarters, and confers upon him the robe and begging bowl of his office. The Master can now pass beyond this life content in the assurance that he has found in Hui-neng a successor of great profundity and wisdom.