

PASS THE PRETZELS

Sometimes I think that it's a miracle that anybody who decides to try Ch'an practice doesn't become confused at best, or go running off screaming into the night at worst. Imagine someone who has heard of Ch'an, but doesn't know much if anything about it, listening to a thumbnail explanation of the tradition:

"First of all," the instructor says, "it must be made perfectly clear that Ch'an requires one's utmost individual effort. You have to do your very, very best, and only you can do this, no one can do it for you. The effort is yours and yours alone. And above all," the instructor says, "while giving it your absolute best shot, don't forget that there is no such thing as one's self." (???)

"Next," says the instructor, "your practice must be as consistent as possible. You should see to it that you make time for your Ch'an meditation and other attendant practices every single day. It should become as regular as brushing your teeth or washing your face. And don't forget," she continues, "you should watch very carefully to ensure that your practice does not become habitual." (?????)

"What we are trying to do," the instructor continues, "is to experience pure emptiness. And to make this easier, here are at least a dozen forms you can utilize to experience it. (?????!)

Now that the potential student is on even shakier ground than he was in the first place, the instructor goes on: "It is a prime tenet of our tradition that this kind of realization is completely beyond words and scriptures. We know this because the Buddha told us, our founder Bodhidharma told us, all the revered Ancestors down to Hui-Neng told us, all the famous enlightened masters of the Tang Dynasty told us, the great Japanese Zen teachers and their North American descendants told us, and today you can go to Borders and get any one of several hundred books on Ch'an and Zen that will tell you beyond a shadow of a doubt that it's all beyond words and scriptures. (?!?!?!?!?)

"The primary object," she continues, is to find our Buddha-Nature, to actualize this Buddha-Nature so that it is interwoven into our life itself; and don't forget that once you find it after your long search, you must immediately let it go. (????!!!!????!!!!?????)

"And of course," she concludes, "we must never forget that our practice produces a great deal of merit. We must be sure that we always dedicate this merit for the benefit of all sentient beings, realizing of course that there is absolutely nothing to be gained whatsoever." (??)

It's a wonder that anyone in the west practices Ch'an at all!

And so, one is faced with several ways of dealing with all of these confusing contradictions; one may reject them outright, one may say, "I'm not sure about this, but maybe I'll give it the benefit of the doubt," one may simply accept them and move on, or one may say, "Pass the pretzels."

To explain:

If one rejects these explanations outright, one is merely being obstinate.

If one decides to give them the benefit of the doubt without going one way or another, one is simply grasping at straws.

If one simply accepts these explanations, one is no better than a copycat.

If, upon hearing these explanations, one says, "Pass the pretzels," one is truly on the path!

And so, learned monks and laypeople, what is the essence of Ch'an?

The Assembly says, "Pass the pretzels!"

Sifu says, "WRONG!!!!!" and smiles impishly.