

The Dream Within A Dream: Yang-shan's Sermon from the Third Seat
Teisho by Rafe Martin, Endless Path Zendo, 9/2020

Wu-men Kuan, Gateless Barrier, case number twenty-five: "Yang-shan's Sermon From the Third Seat."

Yang-shan dreamed he went to Maitreya's realm and was led to the third seat. A senior monk struck the stand with a gavel and announced, "Today the monk in the third seat will preach."

Yang-shan rose, struck the stand with the gavel, and said, "The Dharma of the Mahayana is beyond the Four Propositions and transcends the Hundred Negations. Listen, listen."

That's the entire koan case.

Buddhist tradition says that Maitreya, (the Gently Loving One) is up in the Tushita Heavens right now, working on skillful means (upaya) to help deluded beings down here on Earth find liberation from suffering. Upaya is one of the ten paramitas or "perfections," that bodhisattvas must bring to completion on the way to the complete realization of Buddhahood. Generosity, morality, patience, vigor, meditation, inner strength, determination, wisdom, and knowledge are the others.

Though Maitreya is working hard, to actually develop such complete skillfulness that every breath, the slightest word and least gesture function to liberate others is an immense task. So, he'll need time. In fact, though he's at it every minute he's not expected to be back among us down here on Earth for another five billion years or so. (Heavenly time is different than earthly. A few years there, could be millions here.)

Meanwhile, given his loving kindness, he can't wait that long and is already wandering the dusty highways and crowded markets of our cities and towns looking like an old, pot-bellied, shaven-headed, big-eared monk. In this form he sometimes carries a large sack over his shoulder filled with gifts, or sometimes a wine-gourd, always ready with a smile, a helping hand, a timely word, a laugh, a cup of wine or tea, some sweet buns, or toasted rice cakes to help where needed. In short, he's already using skillful means, doing all he can to keep things from going completely awry. It's not an easy job. So much can and has gone wrong. Yet he tirelessly persists. He's called Hotei in his monkish form, and you can see him as our own realized nature in the tenth and final Ox-Herding picture. The verse for this picture goes like this:

Bare-chested, barefooted he comes into the marketplace
Muddied and dust-covered, how broadly he grins
Without recourse to mystic powers

withered trees he swiftly brings to bloom.

No special powers are needed but when Hotei is around, we all seem to feel better; in fact we feel so good we really come to life. It's said when Shakyamuni realized full and complete enlightenment all beings awoke. When a breeze blows, all sails are filled. When the sea rises, all boats are lifted.

The Ox-herding pictures, a deeply creative 12th century Chinese Zen visual teaching device, uses simple images and deceptively simple poetry to lay out the entire Path of Zen practice-realization, from its challenging start to its profoundly compassionate finish.

At the entrance to all the Zen temples we visited in China on pilgrimage in 2006, stood huge and ferocious guardian figures standing protectively on either side of the open doorway, warding off the malign or unworthy. But once you stepped inside, if you turned back and looked, what you saw was a big, laughing Hotei beaming at you. What was terrifying on the outside, was your friend once you were in. You can also see Hotei at the Chinese restaurant when you get your take out. He's that chubby, gold-painted, round-bellied, "Buddha" sitting on a shelf over the counter, a little, populist image of something mysterious, profound, and grand.

In pre-communist Tibet, images of Maitreya as an advanced bodhisattva were carved or painted onto cliff walls along with the moving inscription and invocation, "Come, Maitreya, come!" In other words, things are tough here on Earth, so please don't take too long. We really need your help and right away!

Yang-shan, an important Chinese Zen teacher from almost twelve hundred years ago, dreams that he's with Maitreya up in his heavenly place. It's a propitious dream, resonant with knowledge and power. Perhaps when he awoke he murmured, "Where'd that come from? I feel honored and refreshed. It must mean something good."

For not only did he dream he was up there, he dreamt that he was seated in the propitious third seat - the seat of honor. First seat belongs to Shakyamuni Buddha, the Buddha of our world cycle. Next is Maitreya, the Buddha Soon-to-Be; well, relatively soon. And third is himself, Yang-shan!

Buddhist tradition says that there are countless worlds spread across the limitless universe, endless galaxies, each consisting of billions of worlds, drifting like falling snowflakes through vast emptiness. On some glorious worlds Buddhas don't need to use strong words to guide their students, like they do here. On those worlds, incense, perfume, food or music can bring the lucky, long-lived, happy beings to complete and perfect enlightenment, anutarra samyak sambodhi.

Lest you think, “Gosh. Why wasn’t I born on one of those worlds?” the catch is that here on Earth, with all its difficulties, Buddhist tradition says that we can awaken, realize our vast, empty, compassionate and wise nature more rapidly than on more elegant, and easy-going planets. Here, the very difficulties and challenges rouse a deeply felt need for peace, truth, and for a maturing spiritual practice. The twist is that our difficulties and challenges can make us do our best. They especially rouse compassion so that we have the opportunity to not just come to enlightenment, but to become bodhisattvas dedicated to the welfare of all. In short, on our Earth we can go the whole route and accomplish not just the good but the best. For, here, impermanence bites us so regularly in the butt, that the need to know why? why? why? is never far away. So, unlike the beings on more seemingly blessed worlds, we don’t have the luxury of endless good times that might allow us to drift aimlessly into rounds of personal pleasure. No. Here we have to get down to the real work and keep at it.

We should be grateful. Our saha world (“saha” means bearable or tolerable) helps us to mature. Here on our bearable world, which is neither so bad that we can’t even begin to practice, nor so good that practice would have little interest for us, here in this middle place, this “middle-earth conditions are perfect for us to take up the demanding and joyous work of ongoing practice-realization. Here we can actually grow beyond the central delusion of “self and other” and realize true wisdom for the sake of all. It is our good karma to be born on this difficult planet Earth and presently have the health and time to commit to the great Path, the Maha Yana - literally, Great Way The universe, we are told by Buddhist tradition, holds no greater treasure.

Because he knows our potential, Maitreya is working hard to get back down here and liberate those still stuck in the sea of sorrow. He sees clearly how our failure to mature beyond what Blake called our “mind-forged manacles,” has led us into endless war, into class struggle, injustice, and environmental destruction. Glaciers melt because of our own self-centeredness, forest, rivers, and countless animal species die because of an error in how we use our minds. Instead of being naturally clear-eyed and awake, we’ve become like sleepwalkers blindly stumbling into the tables, chairs, vases and glassware we’ve inherited, destroying precious things simply because we can’t see them. It’s a sad story. And Maitreya, seeing this clearly, wants to help. He sees, too, that while Shakyamuni Buddha has already come and gone realizing full and perfect enlightenment, somehow our miserable old beat goes on. Maitreya hopes maybe she’ll be able change all that and uplift our sad old tune. As do we. But can we really wait another five billion years to see how that goes? Do we and our imperiled world caught in the throes of our own immaturity and blindness, really have all that time to wait around? Maybe we should get to work ourselves, right now.

Yang-shan certainly thinks so. In his dream he’s already seated among the loftiest

company, way up in the high spiritual heaven of Maitreya Bodhisattva. Seated in the third seat, and handed the teacher's gavel, when it's announced that he will present words of truth, he instantly stands up and before that great assembly, which includes both the Buddha and the Buddha-to-Be, offers words of teaching meant to release all beings from suffering.

Picture something like this in your life. The teacher's gavel is put in your hands and in front of you, row upon row sit the most high-ranking audience, the best of the best in your field, with countless millions more watching on TV. Then you're told to stand and do your stuff! At such a moment we might find that glorious heaven turning into "sweaty-palm nervous land." But Yang-shan doesn't hesitate. He rises, strikes the gavel, Whack! and announces: "The Dharma of the Mahayana is beyond the Four Propositions and transcends the Hundred Negations. Listen, listen."

End of teisho. In a dream he speaks dream words to dream listeners, creating a dream within a dream, within a dream.

What's going on? Why has Master Wu-men chosen to tell the story of an old teacher's dream for us to explore as a subject for focused Zen practice? Koans usually present the words and doings of the great old teachers. What meaning can a dream have? What can words spoken in a dream do? How can they possibly help, let alone save us? And, what is it to be "beyond" all phrases and "transcend" all philosophical positions? Is Yang-shan saying that while words and letters can point toward truth, they can't reach it, can't bring us to it? Is he implying that to get to truth we must let go of words, get beyond anything written or spoken? Is that it?

Zen Master Dogen might disagree. In his profound view, words themselves are as much the truth as stars and cats and crows and clouds. And what about values? How do they fit into, "being beyond everything?" In transcending everything do we leave values behind? But what kind of person would we then be? And how would we fulfill our obligations to parents, family, nation, and planet? What does Yang-shan mean when he says that we have to get beyond all philosophical positions, all words and phrases in order to realize the Dharma truth? Once rid of everything, every position, every word, do we find ourselves in a kind of big bland tub of spiritual mayonnaise where "all is One"? Could that be it, really? Is that the profound Dharma? Or, if not, what does "beyond everything" actually mean?

And why did Wu-men, author of the Gateless Barrier, the first formal book of koans in our koan curriculum, a thousand years ago think that this would be significant? It's just a story of someone dreaming he said something in a dream!

And we don't want dreams, do we? We want truth! After all, isn't that why we sit, why we practice? To wake up! We've already had enough of dreams. Now, we want to be awake, and grasp truth, not wander in dreams. "Enough with the old stories!"

we might say. “We’re here for truth, not to mention psychological well-being, and cool Zenny moments of being ‘in the zone.’”

What is old Wu-men up to? Then, again, what could be more totally beyond all logic, reason, concepts, or positions than a dream within a dream? The old Celtic storytellers were masters of the narrative device known as “interlacement.” They’d start a story, then have a character in that story tell a story and then have a character in that story tell a story, and so on and on, story within story within story within story, like so many Russian nesting dolls, one inside the other, until our ability to follow what’s dream and what’s real is entirely gone. Then all we know, all we can know is what IS that very moment. That alone is real. We are deep in a dream - maybe deeper than ever - and, yet, at the same time more present than ever before, more awake, all our ordinary self-centered concepts of reality having fallen away.

Typically in Zen, all such dreams and dream-like events are termed makyo, meaning mysterious, uncanny, strange, or delusive. Ultimately anything not enlightenment is a makyo, a dream. From the perspective of deep practice-realization even our ordinary waking life is a makyo of sorts, a dream. And in this life, there are also many kinds of low-level makyo, things that occur when the mind quiets in zazen and long buried images, ideas, and sensations bubble up. After a few days of sesshin complex and detailed movies can appear on the wall before us or in the grain of the wood on the floor. Or the walls or floor might seem to ripple in waves. All such experiences are simply signs of deepening practice. We are encouraged by the old teachers to let them come and go like images in a dream and not fixate on them or get involved but just continue steadily with our practice, counting each breath, experiencing the breath, sitting fully focused “thinking not-thinking,” or absorbing ourselves fully in a precise koan point.

Still, this dream of Yang-shan’s is different than such a simple makyo. It feels mysterious, permeated with a timeless and ungraspable meaning. When we awake from such a dream we might find the tang of temple incense on the air. “Was it real?” we might think? “Was it a dream?” we may wonder. Chuang tzu, the ancient Chinese philosopher/sage had a dream in which he was a butterfly. When he awoke he wondered if he was a man who’d dreamed he was a butterfly, or a butterfly dreaming he was a man? Which was real, and how would he know?

As it turns out, some makyo can have deep significance and presage a deeper level of practice. A dream voice might reveal an insight. A scientist might see the solution to a vexing problem, like Crick finding the spiral shape of DNA in a dream. A writer might come upon the solution to his novel-in-process, a musician might hear the closing strains of a symphony she’s yet to write, and a Zen student might rise up through layers of dream into complete wakefulness, all doubts fallen away. Artists, scientists, and religious practitioners through the ages have known this. Creativity may depend upon it. We may call it vision or imagination, instinct, or intuition, but there

are clearly subtle realms like gifts, like grace. Maybe animals know it, too. What after all is instinct?

It's said that when Yang-shan woke from this dream and related it to his teacher, Kuei-shan, Kuei-shan said, "You have attained the rank of sage." But that's not the point.

Wu-men's commentary to the case of Yang-shan's dream goes like this:

Tell me, did Yang-shan preach or not? If you open your mouth you are lost. If you shut your mouth you will also miss 'it.' If you neither open your mouth nor keep it closed, you are one hundred and eight thousand miles off.

One hundred and eight thousand is a classical Buddhist reference to our 108 defilements that with enlightenment or intimacy become the 108 perfections or virtues. Nothing need be added or taken away. Things are already as they are, defilements and perfections, samsara and nirvana. We can't gain intimacy - another traditional name for realization or enlightenment - because it's always here. How can you gain what you've never lost? And who is there to gain it? Intimacy is so intimate there's no one standing separate from what is - grass, stars, broken glass, the Caw! of the crow. There's just this! Though we can't get or gain it, can't hold it with concepts and own it, the good news is we can awake to it.

Still, as Wu-men says if you open your own mouth to agree, saying, "Yes, he did preach," you're already lost. I mean, come on! It was just a dream! He didn't really say a thing. None of it really happened! He just dreamed it! If you dream you wrote a novel did you write it? Hmm. Well, maybe you did - in another world. Who knows?

Then again, if you keep your mouth closed indicating, "No, he didn't say it," you've missed it, too. For something did happen. Yang-shan did have a dream. And in this splendid dream he preached profound words of truth. That's the fact.

If you try to escape Wu-men's dilemma by neither opening nor closing your mouth, committing neither to yes or no you'll find yourself in an even worse fix. How can live your life ignoring facts - things that actually happen? What kind of peace will that get you? How real could such so-called peace be? And what kind of life would you have sitting on a fence, choosing no sides, unable to go one way or the other?

Look, Yang-shan really did have a dream in which he preached in Maitreya's palace. But where can your freedom lie if saying "yes" is wrong, and no is wrong, and silence is wrong, too? Where, then, do we take our stand? How can we be free and how can we actualize and live that freedom if neither yes, no, or silence will do? Wu-men takes it all away - just like Yang-shan's words in his dream! What does it mean that the truth of the Mahayana is beyond every concept, every philosophical position?

Beyond yes and beyond no, beyond both yes and no, beyond neither yes nor no, not beyond any of these possibilities, and so on through the three times of past, present future, until, on and on until, if you follow logic precisely, you end up with four propositions and their hundred negations. Sigh. So much for logic.

But what is it to be awake? And what is it to be asleep? What is a dream, and what is real? And how can we tell? Here's our life in a nutshell. Are we real? Are we dreaming? Is it the one or the other? How shall we respond? How do we respond?

There are small, self-centered dreams that can plague us: "I dream of such and such night and day and want it so bad I'll do anything to get it." That sort. Fierce ambitions find their fuel here. Less drastic versions abound and can form the texture of our ordinary dualistic reality: "I'm in here, she's out there." Or, "That's a tree. That's a raindrop. That's a cow." Ordinary reality is a kind of commonly agreed-upon dream. "We are such stuff as dreams are made on," says Shakespeare through Prospero, the magician and stage manager of *The Tempest*. True enough. There are also weird, mixed-up rootless dreams, dreams of the night that are the result as old Scrooge tells us in *A Christmas Carol*, of the undigested pudding we ate too late at night before going to bed.

And, then, there are large, vast, noble dreams like the dream of Buddhist practice and of Bodhisattva Vows, of our wanting, indeed, vowing to save all suffering beings even while remaining lost in dreams ourselves. That's a big dream, a wild, crazy, magnificent dream. This is the dream that Zen would have us dream. Not just becoming calm. Not just gaining a small bit of peace of mind. Not just being "in the zone," but the impossible dream without any stopping place of entirely seeing through (not simply pushing away) our own habitual self-centeredness, and realizing true intimacy with stars, bugs, trash, wind and rain, clouds and mountains and liberating not only ourselves but all beings. A big dream, indeed!

Roshi Kapleau used to say that enlightenment itself is a dream. It's our own Mind we're talking about and its already been ours from the beginning. What are we going to get with enlightenment that we don't already have? The problem is that we don't know it. So it's an important dream, this dream of enlightenment, a dream on which a great deal of good might depend. Without it and the sincere efforts we make towards its realization we are condemned to living half-lives. We get up in the morning but, wandering in our heads, hardly notice the miracle of the rising sun, or the light on the leaves at mid-day, or the moon and stars at night. We live in our thoughts about things, not things themselves. I cannot tell you how good this cup of tea tastes, how refreshing it is. I can't give you that taste. It is mine alone. To know that taste you'd have to drink it yourself. Ordinary mysteries abound. Yet, while lost in the dream we live, we should not discount that dream's value. Like Yang-shan's dream talk itself, there is truth in actions and words in a dream. "Life is but a dream," the old song says. A Bushman saying that appears in Laurens Van der Post's

book on the Bushmen of the Kalahari - The Heart of the Hunter, goes further and says, "There is a dream dreaming us."

For a dozen years or so I had the good fortune to be invited to tell stories in Zuni Pueblo, one of the most traditional Native communities of North America. One day as Rose and I were driving out of Zuni we saw a terrible figure striding down the highway that runs through the pueblo. It was Atoshle, one of the fierce, punisher kachinas or sacred beings, a kind of wrathful form of compassion such as you might find in Tibetan Buddhism. He wore a big, sacred wooden mask with big sharp teeth and bulging eyes and long black, bloody hair - bloody because one hand held a bloody knife (made of painted wood, actually) and with that hand Atoshle brushes back his bangs, leaving them blood-stained. He would soon pass Da Yalanne Elementary School - the school that looks out on Da Yalanne, Sacred Corn Mountain. Knowing that he was coming, the teachers would rush out to gather the children before he passed the school. If they didn't, and those kids saw Atoshle, the punisher of wrongdoing they would faint dead away, dropping down onto the asphalt of the schoolyard.

Myth isn't just something in a book by Joseph Campbell. Myth is real. Atoshle is real. Roshi Kapleau had a Rinzai-like personality, forceful and direct, yet he took quite a Soto-like stance, intuitive and sensitive when it came to myth. He never spoke of "Buddha figures" or "Buddha statues." He always said, "the Buddha on the altar." Why? The Buddha is real. Maitreya is real. Yang-shan is real. So, you and I are real, too. Dogen wrote in "Gabyo," "Painting of a Rice Cake, in Shobogenzo, Eye of the Treasury of the True Dharma, "If you say a painting is not real, then the myriad things are not real."

Then again, how real is so-called "Reality"? Isn't it in good part what we imagine it to be, or what we are conditioned to believe it to be? Aren't we ourselves in large part what we are conditioned to believe ourselves to be? Have you seen ultraviolet photos of flowers? They are fantastically lit-up as if with neon, providing illuminated landing strips for insects, with almost bright blinking arrows pointing toward the pollen. But we humans don't see this reality. Dogen says in the section "Mountains and Rivers Sutra" of his Shobogenzo, that fish and dragons see water like a palace. If you told them that their palace was just water, they'd be shocked. Then again, humans are shocked when we hear that mountains flow! We don't see it. Yet geologists easily confirm this truth - as do mountain climbers - who find fossil seashells at the top of the Himalayas, which were once the bottoms of ancient seas.

So is Reality really "real," or is it, too, a kind of dream? "We are such stuff as dreams are made on." Bob Dylan adds, in "Talking World War III Blues," "I'll let you be in my dream if I can be in yours." Dreams within dreams. Within a dream.

Shibayama Roshi in his commentary on this koan in Zen Comments on the

Mumonkan mentions that when the Japanese teacher, Takuan, was dying and was pressed by his disciples for a last verse, he picked up his brush and wrote a single word - Dream. Roshi Kapleau used to relate how not long after he arrived at Hosshinji Monastery in Japan, out of the blue one day a monk asked him, "Kapleau-san. Do you believe in dreams?" He told us that it took him many years of dedicated Zen practice before he finally grasped what that monk was seemingly so innocently getting at.

Do you believe in dreams? Who is it that believes in dreams? There is a dream dreaming dreams. There is a dream person teaching in a dream, to dream beings in the koan, and right now as well, here in this zendo.

Is that wrong? Is it wrong that our life is a dream? Does that belittle or demean a thing? It's not that it's "just a dream." Rather it's DREAM! Do we need to change that? Do we need to make it realer? What would that look like? How different would it be? Think again of what Yang-shan said from his dream within a dream: "The Dharma of the Mahayana is beyond the Four Propositions, and transcends the Hundred Negations. Listen, listen." Right now, not just one day in the future when we "get it." Right now Reality is beyond yes, no, up, down, dream, true, real, good, bad, wise, foolish. What is it then? Did Yang-shan express it fully? How will we? For, we must. Everyday we, too, are in the third seat, and everyday someone, some situation, some event puts a gavel in our hands and says, "Speak words of truth!" But "Speak! Speak!" might be the same as "Live! Live!" Or "Show! Show!"

Maybe Mumon knew what he was doing in taking an old dream talk and pasting it on our foreheads like a miner's lamp. If we turn it on, the koan can illuminate our Way. It's not just a story in a Buddhist book, anymore than Atoshle is just a figure in a book on myth or native ethnography. Dream is life.

Here's Wu-men's Verse:

In broad daylight under the blue sky,
He preached a dream in a dream.
Absurd! Absurd!
He deceived the entire assembly.

In broad daylight, under the vast blue sky where nothing can be hidden, no dream or shadow survive, he preached a dream in a dream. Wu-men says, "You've got to be kidding! He deceived them all!! That was his big talk at this big moment in the assembly of past and future Buddhas!?"

Look again. What "them?" US! He tricked US! And Wu-men is still tricking us with this koan case and with his whole Gateless Barrier koan collection. Yang-shan may have played a trick, but so did Wu-men. They're deceiving us even now, tricking us out our small cramped dreams, out of our dreary, little, suffering-causing,

alternatively self-doubting/self-asserting nightmares and putting us out in the bright sunlight where for a moment we can blink our eyes and laugh and laugh. With this dream scenario, Yang-shan and Wu-men have found a way to pull the wool not over, but off our eyes. And that's a pretty good trick, wouldn't you say?

Unlike our endless dreams of slumber, this koan dream is an alarm clock ringing at our bedside, helping us to awake and face the daylight of Right Now.