

# Deshan Lets the Matter Rest

by Kokyo Henkel

Once upon a time in ancient China, Zen Teacher Deshan's attendant asked him, "Where have all the sages since antiquity gone?" Deshan said, "Huh? How's that?" And the attendant said, "The request was for a flying dragon horse as swift as the wind, but instead a lame old tortoise shows up!" (That's a kind of Zen poetic insult. It's kind of sweet, isn't it? If one is going to arrogantly insult someone, at least it can be done with poetry.) Upon hearing that, Deshan let the matter rest. He didn't come back with a defense or snide response in return. He just silently let it be. He ceased and desisted. The next day when Deshan came out of the bath, his attendant passed him a cup of tea. Deshan patted his attendant on the back, kindly, grandfatherly. Then the attendant said to his teacher, "This old fellow has finally gotten a glimpse." (In other words, my old teacher finally understands a bit of Zen.) Again, Deshan let the matter rest.

In Deshan's earlier days as a Zen teacher he was mostly known for being very fierce; he would often shout at his students to wake them up from their complacency. Shouting was a popular Zen thing in those days, and Deshan was one of the people who started that – not to be cruel, but to encourage students to really meet the present moment, cut right to the chase and not beat around the bush or hesitate. This story about Deshan letting it rest probably happened later in his life. He was quite gentle at this point. Instead of shouting when asked, "Where have all the sages of ancient times gone?" he just said, "Huh?" Maybe he'd actually become hard of hearing. The commentary even seems to suggest that he might have become senile. So when he was being arrogantly insulted, instead of coming back with a big shout or striking with his staff, or some other strong presentation, he just let it rest. This story is celebrated in Zen as an example of a perfect response, the wise and compassionate action of a great being.

There's another similar story about Deshan in his later years. One day his feisty student who was the cook at his temple was late getting lunch out, and when Deshan showed up right on time in the dining hall with his eating bowls, the cook asked rather rudely, "Where are you going with your bowls old man? The meal bell hasn't been rung yet." Deshan simply turned around and walked back to his room to wait for the bell. When accused of simply arriving on time, Deshan could have admonished the cook for being late serving lunch, but he didn't. Again he let it rest and just responded to the situation, going along with the flow. He responds with non-defensiveness when being pushed, challenged and insulted, and is able to humbly, silently just let it be. One way of hearing these stories is just about not reacting when pushed or criticized. So hard to do, and such a radical response, especially for a strong personality like Deshan. And such a response is also a great teaching for Deshan's students if they are attentive enough to receive it.

I can be quite a defensive person sometimes. I'll often have a quick rational response if someone challenges me with something that doesn't make sense to me. I want to notice this habitual tendency more clearly, because being defensive is not joyful, and usually isn't worth the trouble. Taking things personally is painful, and it's really based on the illusion that "I" as a separate independent self am being attacked, accused, belittled, judged. Defensiveness doesn't seem so painful at the time it's happening – because we feel strong, like we know we're right – but actually it doesn't usually work out too well, it's not really enlivening at all, and there is a pain underneath it, the contraction based on the illusory sense of separate self.

In Dogen Zenji's collection of informal talks he says, "Even if you are speaking rationally and another person says something unreasonable, it is wrong to defeat him by arguing logically. On the other hand,

don't just give in and say you are wrong if you think your opinion is reasonable. It is best just to leave the matter alone and stop arguing. If you can drop it, he will be able to also let it go, and nobody will get angry."

The Buddha speaks of the eight winds of the world, the winds that blow us off our seat, the events towards which we are most tempted to react in a defensive way. There are pain and pleasure, gain and loss, praise and blame, fame and disgrace. These are all pairs of opposites, and they are what push us off our comfortable seat. We get caught up trying to increase or maintain pleasure and trying to prevent or avoid pain. These winds are blowing on us all day long in one form or another, in light breezes and big storms. How can we just let it rest when these slings and arrows of outrageous fortune come at us? That's a major part of our practice. Zazen practice in particular can be seen as a training in letting it rest. We can just sit upright and unmoving in the midst of these winds. One thing we learn in zazen is that the winds aren't really coming from outside; we may be sitting in a nice calm, quiet zendo where nobody's bothering us, and the winds are still roaring. They are internal winds coming from our conceptual thinking and all based around the illusion of "me" which seems to be separate from the experience of the moment – thus we take it all "personally."

Just letting it be is so simple, yet so difficult. Again and again, letting it rest: what a challenge when the winds of the world seem strong; maybe it takes being senile! It doesn't say what happened with Deshan's attendant in the story when Deshan let it rest. Maybe he had to contemplate his teacher's silence for a while. We can imagine he was waiting for the comeback and planning another attack, but when the comeback doesn't come, what then?

This kind of thing has happened with me and my teacher various times. Sometimes I would ask him, with great sincerity, to give me any feedback he would like to offer about my practice. The next day he would casually mention something I was doing that was a little bit off, and I'd quickly start justifying the reason I was doing it. When he would remind me that I asked him for feedback and he was giving it, I'd feel a bit embarrassed. I wasn't expecting that kind of feedback, rather I was hoping for the kind I would like to receive!

I also remember an interaction with another teacher of mine, a monk who was visiting the monastery at Tassajara where I was living. A group of students was questioning him about some point of doctrine in a somewhat challenging way, and he was kindly responding. I wasn't so involved in the issue myself, but due to the energetic nature of the conversation, I began getting pulled in and taking sides. Isn't it amazing that, when given the chance, we can so easily form an opinion about something not so important to us, and then start defending it as if our life depended on it? So I slipped into involvement in this conversation and I started rationally arguing. I was finding myself in a debate I really didn't want to be in, but once I was in it I felt compelled to keep going; at some point the issue was no longer even important, but it was very important to be right! We were going back and forth more and more intensely until at one point the teacher just stopped. He ceased and desisted and just smiled peacefully. He caught what was happening and just stopped. And it worked. I wouldn't say I was greatly enlightened, but suddenly all the energy that I was directing at this person almost knocked me over backwards. His silence was like a lion's roar. I immediately was able to reflect on my mind: what am I doing?!? I'm completely involved and I really don't even care so much about this topic. It had become just about winning the argument!

One modern commentary on this old Zen story says, "Deshan was like a grandfather who lets his grandchild be just as he is, even if the child is playing in the mud. Eventually the child will want to get out of the mud and get clean." May we all learn to be as patient, loving, and large-hearted as old Deshan.