

Mystical Communion, Meeting Buddha

by Kokyo Henkel

At the end of a busy day, we sometimes feel tired and disconnected from our true heart and from other people. We might have a conscious wish to sit down on a cushion, relax, and exhale completely, letting go of ourselves and our constricted way of being in the world. It's difficult to say where this wish actually comes from, but if we follow it, then sometimes a larger awareness begins to dawn, zazen starts to sit zazen, and the heart begins to open. How does such a miraculous thing happen? Dogen Zenji writes, "The aspiration for awakening arises in the mystical communion between buddhas and sentient beings. It is not given by buddhas or bodhisattvas, it is not created by oneself, and it does not simply arise spontaneously."

This altruistic aspiration to free all beings and realize awakening arises in mystical communion, or *kanno doko* in Japanese. *Kan* is to perceive or intuit something. *O* is responsiveness. So *kanno* is intuitively perceiving a response from buddha, from buddha-nature. Buddha is always responding to us. And buddha is not somewhere out there, apart from us. Our own buddha-nature—the open, compassionate, boundless nature of mind—is right here, but we're not usually in touch with it. When we, as sentient beings, put forth some intention, aspiration, or receptivity, we meet buddha. Our buddha-nature is always responding to our sentient being nature, and sometimes we can appreciate this meeting.

Do means way, and *ko* is crossing or meeting, joining or intersecting, communicating or exchanging, so *kanno doko* could be translated literally as "intuition and response, the way of communion." Other translations include "mutual resonance between stimulus and response" and "sympathetic resonance." It's a dynamic term that's hard to translate into English; I've found that "mystical communion" speaks well to the feeling of it.

Shunryu Suzuki Roshi said, "To ask buddha to come is the meaning of offering incense." Sometimes we create an image of buddha that looks like a person sitting in zazen, place it on an altar, and make an offering to it with the sincere wish to meet awakened nature. We may put forth an inquiry or aspiration, and if we do so wholeheartedly, we may notice a response. I think we all have had this experience of inquiry and response coming up together. When you sit down for zazen but instead start working through all kinds of problems with the conceptual mind, eventually you may catch yourself. A little bit of intention arises to stop and settle right here and now, giving up the endless turmoil of self-centered thought for the benefit of all. We put forth the intention and the response is right there: a deeper relaxation, ease, and presence. Buddha meets us and confirms we are on the right track, and baby bodhichitta is born. This is the illusory sentient being called "me" in mystical communion with inconceivable buddha-nature—"small mind" resonating with "big mind."

Mystical communion can also apply to the relationship of student and teacher. If a student in dokusan says, "Everything is going just fine, I don't have anything particular to bring up today," then the teacher can't do much with that. She might just respond, "Alright, well have a nice day," and the meeting is over. However, it's different if the student says, "I'm really struggling, I have some embarrassing things to confess. I'm just going to put the issue out there because I trust you won't scorn me." The student puts it out there and the teacher doesn't scorn him. Instead the

response is “I understand, I really empathize, I’m with you.” In such a meeting we feel met, but if we don’t express ourselves straightforwardly, then the meeting may seem not to have happened at all.

Zhiyi, one of the ancient Chinese founders of the Tiantai School, spoke directly of mystical communion. “The water does not rise up, nor does the moon come down, yet in a single moment the one moon manifests in all bodies of water,” taught Zhiyi. “Buddha does not come, and sentient beings do not go to buddha, yet they meet through the person’s inquiry and the buddha’s response. This is subtle mystical communion.” According to Zhiyi, there are four types of relationships between inquiry or receptivity of people and the response of buddha: imperceptible inquiry and imperceptible response; imperceptible inquiry and perceptible response; perceptible inquiry and imperceptible response; and perceptible inquiry and perceptible response.

To illustrate these four kinds of mystical communion between buddhas and sentient beings, Hakuun Yasutani Roshi told a true story: A Japanese man, who was nominally Buddhist but didn’t really know anything about Buddhist practice, decided to visit a Zen temple with his daughter to enjoy the beautiful gardens. His daughter was sick with the flu, and he thought it would be a peaceful place to walk around, maybe good for his daughter’s health. They did walk around the gardens, and they were beautiful and serene. This is an example of imperceptible inquiry and imperceptible response.

Since their spirits were uplifted by the walk, they decided to stop in and visit the abbot, who served them tea. As the father and daughter were leaving, the abbot offered them a small sutra book, the kind of free distribution book that is sometimes given to anyone who comes for tea in Asian temples, a little souvenir of their visit. The man didn’t think anything of it, and when he got home he put the sutra book on his family’s home altar. This is a kind of imperceptible inquiry and perceptible response: a book of Buddha’s teachings entered this man’s home without him consciously looking for such a thing.

A few years later, the man was relaxing one afternoon and happened to be looking at the altar. “What’s that up there?” he thought. “Oh yes, it’s that sutra book that a Zen teacher gave me a while back. I’ve never opened it.” He picked it up and opened it randomly to some words of the Buddha about cause and effect. “Actually, this is pretty interesting,” he thought. “I’ve never heard this kind of thing before.” The Buddha’s words struck him in a new way, so he thought he might look more into such things. He went to a bookstore, picked up another sutra and read it, but he still was not receiving direct guidance from a living teacher and wasn’t sure exactly what the dharma was really about. This is an example of perceptible inquiry but somewhat imperceptible response.

Eventually the man decided to pay a visit to the Zen teacher who had given him the sutra book years before. He wanted to speak with a practitioner about some of the profound teachings he was reading, to engage the dharma more directly so he might better apply the teachings to his own life. He began visiting the Zen temple regularly, and the teacher suggested he take up the practice of zazen to help understand the Buddha’s words. By now, this man’s life had begun to really change, and great aspiration to deepen his practice arose in him: perceptible inquiry and perceptible response. Sometimes this is how things work in our life. It’s hard to know how

causes and conditions will play out over time, so there's no reason to be discouraged about how our practice is going.

Buddha-nature is constantly knocking on our door, and sometimes we hear the knock but wouldn't think of calling it buddhanature. We may walk past a homeless person and then suddenly decide to turn around, go back, and give her some change. That could be a knock from buddhanature, opening our heart of compassion a little, beyond our small, separate self. The buddhanature station is always sending out radio waves, but if we are not tuned in to that station, we don't hear the music. When we think of the initial factors that brought us to spiritual practice, we can try to trace back our experience to various events, turning points in our life. These can all be seen as aspects of mystical communion. These events may not seem related to practice at the time, but later we come to see that they were quite important, sometimes perceptible and sometimes imperceptible call and response.

There are many metaphors for this mystical communion in the Mahayana sutras and stories about it in the Zen lineage. For example, in the *Lotus Sutra's* "Life Span of the Tathagata" chapter, the Buddha says, "When living beings have become sincerely faithful, honest and upright, with gentle intentions, wholeheartedly wishing to behold the Buddha, not holding back at all, then I and the awakened sangha appear here on sacred Vulture Peak... and every other dwelling place." We must be wholehearted, and yet at the same time, we are only able to be wholehearted because of buddha. Thus the workings of mystical communion are truly inconceivable.

One of the Chinese Zen ancestors, Caoshan, once asked his friend De, "Buddha's inconceivable reality body, the dharmakaya, is like space, yet it manifests form in response to beings as the rupakaya, like the moon reflected in water. How do you explain this principle of response?" De said, "Like a donkey looking into a well." Caoshan responded, "That's a great answer, but you only said eighty percent." De asked, "How would you say it?" Caoshan replied, "Like the well looking at the donkey." A sentient being has to look in order to see buddha, but buddha is already looking back; the principle of response is always available, but it only manifests in such a meeting. The response of the buddha's rupakaya is also called "blessings" (*adhithana*), which is like buddha's true nature resonating in harmony with a sentient being's buddha-nature when it is called forth with devotion. These blessings naturally relieve discontent, which is always based on a limited, constricted view of self and others. Therefore what we call compassion is not something other than the boundless awareness of buddha-nature, free from the illusion of separation and duality. When open awareness sees sentient beings, including our own body and mind, suffering from the illusion of separation, it naturally wishes to bring them across to the peaceful shore of awakened peace.

Dogen's teacher, Rujing, taught him a verse to silently recite when prostrating to the Buddha: "Bower and bowed to are both naturally empty and still; mystical communion is inconceivable." Then he said to Dogen, "Please understand the significance of mystical communion. If there were no mystical communion, the buddhas would not have appeared in the world and Bodhidharma would not have come from the West."

Buddha can't just magically zap us with awakening, and we can't just wake up by the power of our small individual self. Some people think of "Pure Land" practice in a limited way as simply

relying on the “other-power” of Amitabha Buddha to save them, but that’s giving too much responsibility to buddha. Others believe in “self-power,” relying only on their own individual practice effort, but that’s putting too much emphasis on the illusory separate self. As Dogen says, “Just cast body and mind into the house of buddha, then all is done by buddha. When you do so, you are free from birth and death and become a buddha without effort or calculation.” When a person aspires to drop away self-centered attachments to body and mind, buddha responds.