

## Mahayashyapa's Smile

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The Buddha was nearing his death, and he knew he had to assign someone to be his successor. Someone had to lead the monks and lay people after he died. Indeed, the death of the founder of a religion is one of the most crucial times in its history. For us to have heard about Buddhism at all in our time, on the other side of the planet, we depend on the skillful transmission of the teachings to be carried down through the ages.

But how to do it? The Buddha decided to have one final sermon on the teachings. There he would announce who his worthy successor would be. So all of the monks gathered in the great hall of the monastery where they happened to be staying. The Buddha walked out to the middle of the room and sat down as he usually did when he was about to give a lecture. He was quiet for a long minute. Finally he reached down and picked up a flower; probably a lotus. Slowly and gently the Buddha twirled the flower in his hand – back and forth. Still

he said nothing. People looked at each other perplexed. What did this mean? What was the Buddha trying to communicate? At last, Mahakashyapa, a respected disciple of the Buddha who was sitting in the front row, saw the flower and smiled. When the Buddha saw this he said, "I have the eye treasury of [the truth], the subtle mind of Nirvana, the true form of no-form, and the flawless gate of the teaching. It is not established upon words and phrases. It is a special transmission outside tradition. I now entrust this to Mahakashyapa."

This story is a very famous one. It is from a collection of Zen stories and koans called the Mumonkan or "The Gateless Gate." In fact it establishes something of a tradition in Zen in which transmission of the dharma or Buddha's teachings, pass from one teacher down to the student. Some Zen groups claim that you can in fact trace a direct line from them to their teacher to their teacher's teacher up through to Bodhidharma, who brought Buddhism from India into China, all the way to Mahakashyapa and the Buddha himself. Sort of the Buddhist version of apostolic succession if you will. Personally, I don't put much stock in apostolic succession in either Christianity or Buddhism. However the Buddha is trying to make a point here. That enlightenment, or the ultimate understanding of life, is not to be found in books or rituals. It is wordless. It is ineffable. It transcends our conventional

understanding, and so can only be transmitted through the twirling of a flower.

The great Zen Master Wu Men is the editor of the Mumonkan, and provides both commentary and a poem for each of the stories. This story is known as The Buddha Twirls a Flower, and Wu Men has this to say about it:

“Gold-faced Gautama insolently degrades noble people to commoners. He sells dog meat under the sign of mutton and thinks it is quite commendable. Suppose that all the monks had smiled - how would the eye treasury of the truth have been transmitted? Or suppose that Mahakasyapa had not smiled? How could he have been entrusted with it? If you say that the eye treasury can be transmitted, that would be as if the gold-faced old fellow were swindling people in a loud voice at the town gate. If you say the eye treasury cannot be transmitted, then why did the Buddha say that he entrusted it to Mahakashyapa?”

And his poem:

“Twirling a flower, the snake shows its tail. Heaven and Earth are confused by Mahakashyapa’s smile”

I love this commentary! Doesn’t it sound like Wu Men is a Unitarian Universalist?! At first blush it looks like Wu Men is getting all

rational on us. He starts poking holes in this method for choosing a successor. It would seem that it runs some risks; that's for sure. But what Wu Men is really objecting to is this notion of "transmitting." Our language and our minds use this term as if the Buddha's teaching were some sort of baton that passes from one person to the next. Teacher has the baton of truth, and when the student is deemed ready to receive it, it is passed on to them. A generation later they will hand it off to the next person in the line. This metaphor infers that the teaching is somehow an object that can be handled. Wu Men's point is that if you think that is what the Buddha was doing then he is like a swindler in the market place, because he knows the truth and yet is not giving it to us straight.

Enlightenment, the ultimate truth, or what Wu Men poetically calls the "eye treasury of the truth" is not to be thought of as external to us. The most profound understanding is attainable by everyone. All of us have the potential to be Buddhas. Mahakashyapa wasn't unique in that regard. Any one of his colleagues could have "gotten the joke" so to speak. Arguably they should have. But Mahakashyapa was the only one who did.

Now it might have been, and if we are more sympathetic to the Buddha than our friend Wu Men we may think this, that the Buddha

knew Mahakashyapa extraordinarily well. Perhaps the Buddha knew that Mahakashyapa was just a hairsbreadth away from complete understanding, and just needed a little nudge to go over the edge. And so this last sermon, sometimes referred to as the Flower Sermon, was just what the doctor ordered. True, there is technically nothing being transmitted from the Buddha to his student. But what the Buddha really did was just one small little action that woke up that Buddha-potential in his student so that he smiled. I believe that the Buddha knew something better than most of us: small actions can have big results. (repeat)

We never truly know what is going on in other people's minds and hearts. Small things we say and do can make all the difference to them. So often I think we strive in vain to "win hearts and minds" as a nation or turn to self-help gurus for the "personal power" to get the things we want. Some have even tried to pass it off as some grand "secret"; presumably if you make it sound mysterious then people will be more inclined to believe what you tell them. But there is no secret, no magic formula. Just the basic truth that small actions can have big results.

I will never forget the time in Omaha when this became very clear to me. I believe I have told this story before in a different context, so bear with me if you have heard it. But it was a busy Sunday in Omaha

Nebraska. I was putting together the finishing touches on the sermon and the reading, and had left the meditation for the last minute. I could not for the life of me find a good meditation that fit with the theme of the service that morning. So I picked one pretty much at random out of my big book of meditations.

Went through the service, read the meditation much as we do in our service here, and everything seemed to go pretty swimmingly. That is until I read my email Monday morning. Occasionally one gets feedback from sermons this way, so I wasn't too surprised. But what did surprise me was that the feedback was not about the sermon I wrote but about the meditation I had read. The meditation was entitled "When Love Ends" and talked about how we let go and say good bye to people who are meaningful to us in our lives. The email I was reading came from a woman who was a pillar in the church. She and her husband had one of those marriages that seemed rock solid. Yet she was telling me that they had been thinking about separating for some time, and that the meditation I had read had rekindled this conversation. Thus began a month of pastoral counseling with both of them, around whether or not to break up. In the end they decided to stay together – and they are still together some ten years hence.

This incident taught me many things. One was don't be afraid to break with the theme of your worship service! But the other, more profound lesson was that small actions can have big results. We all have more power than we think we do. So often we don't feel powerful, and can speak without understanding how we affect other people. It's hard to get a feedback loop most of the time. The effects of our words and deeds can take a long time to be made manifest and we most likely won't be there to see it. But the consequences are real. The mood of the person we talk to. The thoughts that are stimulated by what we said. These are all powerful things that come about from very small actions and gestures on our part.

All it took for Mahakashyapa to attain supreme understanding and be the worthy successor to the Buddha was to see the Buddha twirl a flower. I don't know why or how that did it. Like all of the best jokes, I guess you had to be there! But you never know. Giving someone a flower can be a powerful act, in and of itself.

That is what we do this morning at our annual Flower Communion ritual. We give a flower, and then when the service is over, we take a flower. The rule being that you take a flower that someone else brought. Why? Because in community we know that small actions can have big results. The flower you put in the vase represents yourself,

but also all of the small ways in which you have done something for someone else, asked after a friend or an acquaintance when you heard they were ill, or just shook the preacher's hand at the end of the worship service and said, "Nice job this morning!" All of those are small actions. They are the things you did and said this year in your church that probably didn't seem like a big deal to you at the time.

And we also take a flower. More specifically we take a flower that someone else brought to church this morning. The giver and the receiver of the flower most likely won't know each other. But to receive a flower is to receive a gift. It is a beautiful thing to receive. Just as in the past year you had a moment of deep connection to someone here at church. Your child came home excited about a project in their RE class. Your family had a ball at the intergenerational holiday party decorating the sanctuary. You laughed or cried at a dedication or wedding or a Christmas pageant. All of these things are flowers we have received. The people who put in untold time and energy to make those moments possible may not be aware that their actions had such a dramatic effect on you. Just as the giver and receiver of the flower don't know who the other one is, so too those who have had an experience of the Holy may not know all of the people in the interdependent web of existence who came together in exactly

the right way to have lead us to this moment. All we do know is that small actions can have big results.

I think the Buddha knew. I don't think he was trying to trick us with language. Far from it – the Flower Sermon is all about understanding arising outside of language and learning. But I do think that the Buddha was hyperaware of how connected he was to other people. He was not more connected to others than the rest of us – he was simply more aware of it than we are. The word Buddha, after all, means “the one who is awake.” His job is not to “transmit” things or to pass off the holy baton to someone else. His job is simply to help us to also be awake.

And so it can be. But the Buddha is long gone from us – or so it would seem. The Esoteric branch of Buddhism taught that the Buddha had three bodies. One was a body just like ours. It died thousands of years ago. But they say he had two other bodies – in one of his bodies, he is present in his statues and images. Therefore it is appropriate to bow before those images as if it were the Buddha himself who was present.

But the most interesting body, they say the Buddha had, was his “Dharmakaya” his “teaching body.” So that whenever you are reading a book and you have one of those “A ha!” moments when you get it

and it makes sense and the world seems orderly and good; that is the Buddha in his teaching body made real before you. And it isn't just with books and wisdom that this happens. On the compassionate end of things, anytime someone comes to you and helps you in just the right way. They have exactly what you need to be happy in that moment. They are the Buddha for you, living in his teaching body. When we ask after that sick relative or shed tears when our Connection Circle comes together, then we are in the presence of the Buddha. But when you look up and expect to see him, what do you really see? The faces of your friends at church. We are all just one twirl of the flower away from being Buddha to someone who is desperately in need. That is how we build our church community.

At the end of the service when Scott is playing the postlude, instead of sitting as you normally would, please come up front and take a flower. As you cradle it in your hands take some time today to consider two things: what did you do or say this past year, either here at church or elsewhere, where you were the Buddha for someone. How did you help them? Secondly, what flowers of wisdom and compassion did you receive this past year from someone at church? Hopefully it was a minister or someone on staff, but think broader than that. Who made it possible for you to have the experiences you did this

year? More than one person's hands I suspect. Try to feel a connection to them if you can.

This Flower Communion let us remember that small actions can have big results. May our actions be useful in bringing about more wisdom and compassion to the people around us. May it be so today and everyday. Amen Blessed Be.