

## Good From Bad

Compassion unguided by wisdom easily make pious fools of us, fearing bad karma even in criticizing evil and wrong, and so we become easy lackeys of the cunning and canny.<sup>1</sup> Wisdom untempered by compassion turns us into clever talking heads who would give the best explanations for a problem without raising a finger to solve it.<sup>2</sup> We need to have a right balance of wisdom and compassion when examining or executing a skillful means.

With such an understanding let us now examine an oft-quoted modern Zen story; indeed, popular enough to be cited by even non-Buddhists as their own.<sup>3</sup>

Two Zen monks, Tazan and Ekido, traveling on pilgrimage, came to a muddy river crossing. There they saw a lovely young woman dressed in her kimono and finery, obviously not knowing how to cross the river without ruining her clothes. Without further ado, Tazan graciously picked her up, held her close to him, and carried her across the muddy river, placing her onto the dry ground.

Then he and Ekido continued on their way. Hours later they found themselves at a lodging temple. And here Ekido could no longer restrain himself and gushed forth his complaints:

“Surely, it is against the rules what you did back there... Touching a woman is simply not allowed... How could you have done that? ... And to have such close contact with her! ... This is a violation of all monastic protocol...”

Thus he went on with his verbiage. Tazan listened patiently to the accusations.

Finally, during a pause, he said, “Look, I set that girl down back at the crossing. Are you still carrying her?”

Zen master Tazan)

(Based on an autobiographical story by Japanese

Tazan (1819-1892) was a Japanese Buddhist priest and professor of philosophy at the Japanese Imperial University (now the University of Tokyo) during the Meiji period. He was regarded as a Zen master, and figured in several well-known koans, and was also well-known for his disregard of many of the precepts of everyday Buddhism, such as dietary laws.<sup>4</sup>

The first thing we should note is that this is an autobiographical Zen story; it probably did not happen, not exactly in this manner, anyway. For if it did, then it has a serious ethical problem, where one is good at the cost of the perceived evil or projected foolishness of another. I think it was the Irish playwright, George Bernard Shaw (1856-1950) who was said to have quipped, “There are bad women because there are good women.”

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<sup>1</sup> Two examples of such a person, according to **Sigāl’ovāda S** (D 31.15/3:185), are the sweet-talker (*anuppiya, bhānī*, lit “speaker of what is pleasant”), one who says what others like to hear, one who is politically correct at best, a flatterer, a toady, and the destructive companion (*apāya, sahāya*, lit “a companion who leads one to loss”); Comy: “a companion who brings about loss of wealth” (*bhogānaṃ apāyesu sahāyo hoti*, DA 3:948), a wastrel. Qu at J 2:390,19\*.

<sup>2</sup> Two examples of such a person, according to **Sigāl’ovāda S** (D 31.15/3:185), are the downright taker (*añña-d-atthu, haro*, lit “one who merely takes away”) the out-and-out robber, and the mere talker (*vacī, paramo*, lit “who is word at best”), “a man of much profession” (DPL), one who merely pays lip-service, an empty vessel, an insincere person.

<sup>3</sup> This popular seems to have inspired a number of quotes and adaptations:

Daoist, <http://weblog.raganwald.com/2007/10/three-stories-about-tao.html>;

Jewish, [http://www.bethelsudbury.org/jewish\\_basics/text005.php3?page=735](http://www.bethelsudbury.org/jewish_basics/text005.php3?page=735);

Catholic, <http://www.fisheaters.com/twomonks.html>;

<sup>4</sup> Japanese Zen practitioners’ disregard for Buddhist precepts is proverbial, and which is psychologically compensated by their almost military ritual formalism. Compounded by the Japanese culture of face and silence, serious breach of human decency easily occurs, esp with Japanese master in the west. See eg the case of Shimano sensei: [http://www.thezensite.com/ZenEssays/CriticalZen/Aitken\\_Shimano\\_Letters.html](http://www.thezensite.com/ZenEssays/CriticalZen/Aitken_Shimano_Letters.html).

Indeed, a bodhisattva who is regarded as good or compassionate on account of the evil or lack of others would actually be a selfish person, as such a bodhisattva would not be independently good. A true bodhisattva is one who, being himself a highly virtuous being, is capable of inspiring goodness in another, even to the bodhisattva's disadvantage.

Tanzan's self-told tale has a serious moral flaw if he made himself appear virtuous on account of Ekido's concern for the Vinaya. Such a person as Ekido, however, was simply rare in Meiji Japan, where priests were as a rule non-celibate. As such, it was likely that Tanzan had invented a Vinaya-respecting monk as a foil for our self-righteousness.

On the other hand, Tanzan's tale also evinces his serious lack of understanding of the Vinaya rules. For, in a real life situation, even a Vinaya-observing orthodox Theravada monk would help this lady in every way he could, or he would ask his colleague or some other suitable persons to help the woman. If a Vinaya-keeping monk has helped the woman, he has done a good deed by breaking a minor rule, for which he only needs to confess before another monk, and remind himself not to wander into improper places the next time. There is no need of any skillful means here, only common sense.

### Revisiting Buddhism 23

[an occasional re-look at the Buddha's Example and Teachings]

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