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Sayings and Doings of Zen Master Raven

A Fable in Progress

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SEARCHING FOR A MASTER

WHEN RAVEN was living near Jack Rabbit Rōshi, he visited him frequently to inquire about the Way. One day he asked, "I hear that the Buddha Shākyamuni looked up from beneath the Bodhi tree and saw the morning star and announced his realization.¹ I get the feeling that something is missing from the story. What happened when he saw the star?"

Jack Rabbit laid back his ears, closed his eyes, and said, "He realized the truth of mutually dependent arising."²

"Well," thought Raven, "Jack Rabbit Rōshi seems to know his Buddhism, but maybe I'm not a Buddhist." So he flew off to see Prairie Dog Rōshi. When he announced himself, Prairie Dog poked her head out of her burrow, blinking in the bright sunshine. Raven told her about his encounter with Jack Rabbit Rōshi, and asked, "What happened when the Buddha saw the morning star?"

Prairie Dog crawled out and stood erect. She crossed her paws on her chest, scanned the horizon briefly, and said, "He realized the underlying fact of oneness."³

"Well," thought Raven, "Prairie Dog Rōshi seems to know her metaphysics, but maybe I'm not a metaphysician." So he flew off to see Moose Rōshi and found him feeding on waterweed in the creek at Densepine. Perching himself on a rock, he croaked for the Rōshi's attention. When Moose looked up, Raven told him about his encounters with Jack Rabbit Rōshi and Prairie Dog Rōshi, and asked, "What happened when the Buddha saw the morning star?"

Moose dipped his face in the creek again and came up munching. "Delicious waterweed," he said.

"Well," thought Raven, "That sounds more natural." He sat on the rock a moment, but Moose said nothing further and just went on feeding. "Okay," thought Raven, "maybe I'll come back, but for now I think I'll continue this pilgrimage." So he flew off to see Brown Bear Rōshi. Announcing himself, he stood and waited outside the den. Brown Bear eventually emerged and squatted silently on his haunches. Raven told him how Jack Rabbit Rōshi had said the Buddha Shākyamuni realized the truth of mutually dependent arising, how Prairie Dog Rōshi had said he had realized the underlying fact of oneness, and how Moose Rōshi just said, "Delicious waterweed."

"What is your opinion, Rōshi?" asked Raven.

Brown Bear made a strange sound, and Raven couldn't tell whether it was a chuckle or a growl. Finally he spoke. "Something's still missing," he said. Raven waited respectfully, but the Rōshi remained silent.

"Well, thought Raven, "Brown Bear Rōshi seems to know about something. Maybe I should stick around for instruction."

METAPHOR

As they got better acquainted, Raven would ride on Brown Bear's back as he foraged for food. When they were setting out one day, Raven asked, "Do you teach exclusively with metaphor?"

Brown Bear said, "The robin sings in the oak tree; the finch sings in the madrone."

Raven asked, "What do they stand for?"

Brown Bear turned his head to look at Raven and asked, "The lark sings in the deep blue sky—what more can you ask?"⁴

Raven asked, "What is this singing?"

Brown Bear turned back to the path and grunted, "We'll have auditions again tonight."

FAITH

One morning after a round of zazen,⁵ Raven asked Brown Bear, "Does faith have a role in Zen practice?"

Brown Bear said, "Great faith."

Raven asked, "How should I direct it?"

Brown Bear said, "One, two, three."

THE UNBORN

Relaxing with Brown Bear under the night sky, Raven asked, "What is the unborn?"

Brown Bear said, "Awesome."

Raven asked, "Is it the same thing as the void?"

Brown Bear asked, "Where does all this come from?"

TURNING POINTS

Raven sat with Brown Bear at zazen one early morning, and afterwards he asked, "Why don't we study turning points that are relevant for the forest today?"⁶

Brown Bear said, "Ask me a relevant question."

Raven asked, "Does the bear-hunter have Buddha nature?"

Brown Bear growled, "Mu."⁷

"There you go," Raven said, "Mu is an old Asian word."

Brown Bear said, "That's the problem."

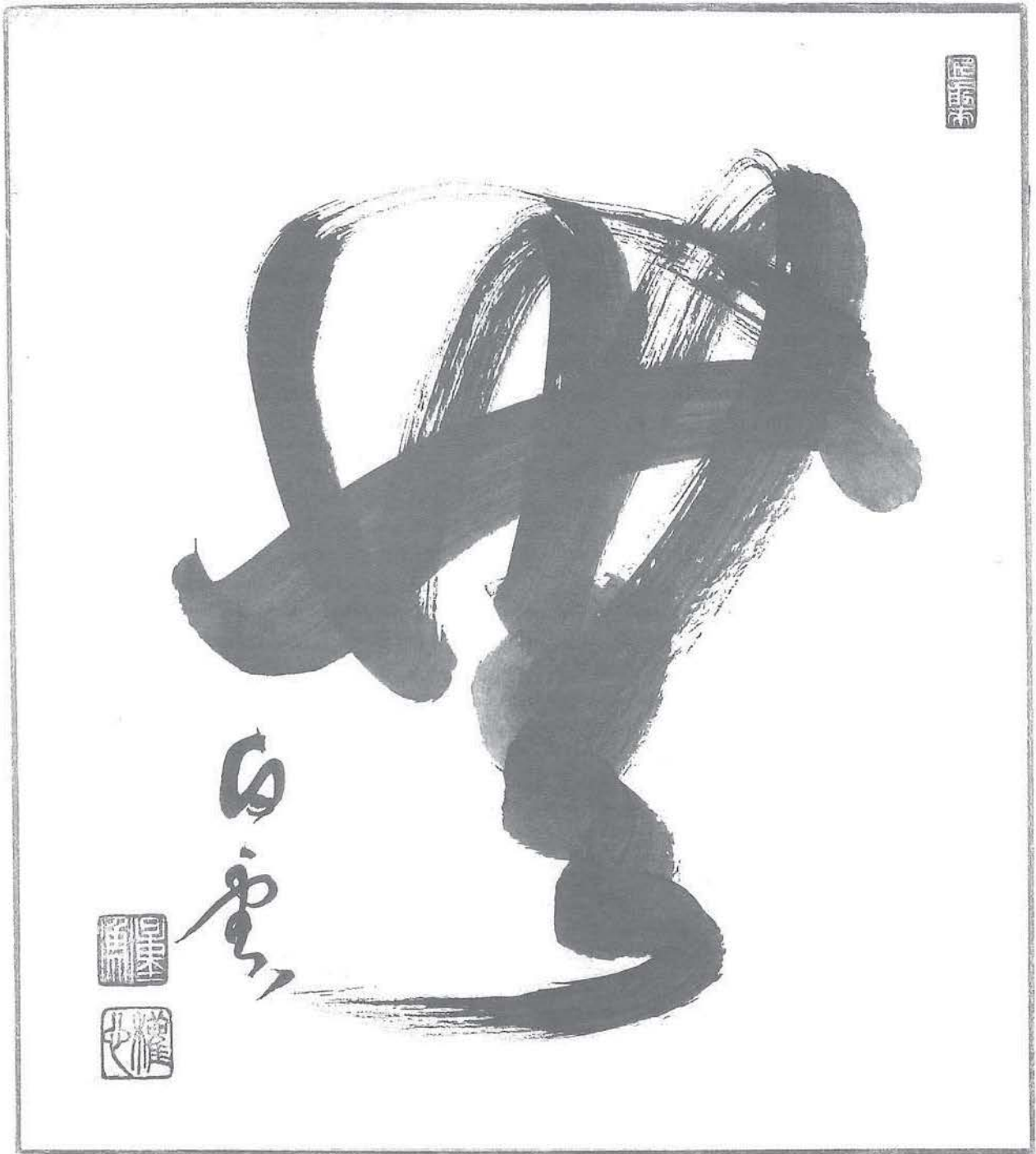
CHARACTER

One evening, in a discussion of his personal problems, Raven asked Brown Bear, "What is the role of character in Zen practice?"

Brown Bear said, "I try to keep my promises."

Raven said, "I try to keep my promises too, but I'm easily distracted."

Brown Bear said, "The cold wind reminds me."



Mu ("No," "Does not have")

Yasutani Haku'un

BIRTH AND DEATH

One evening after chanting sutras, Raven said, "Over at Jack Rabbit Rōshi's community, we were taught that we should be free from birth and death. I've never known how to go about this."

Brown Bear said, "That's because it isn't possible."

Raven: "There was a clear implication that it is."

Brown Bear lunged at Raven with a horrific snarl. Raven let out a croak and flew to the gray pine nearby.

Brown Bear looked up at him and asked, "What happened to make you croak?"

Raven hopped down to a lower perch and said, "I would rather ask the robin to explain."

Brown Bear sniffed and said, "Now the robin is taking over."

Raven said, "Only his beautiful song."

Brown Bear asked, "What happened to the stones and trees?"

Raven let out a croak.

Brown Bear asked, "Where did they go?"

Raven croaked and then croaked again.

Brown Bear nodded his big head slowly and bared his teeth at Raven. "The robin seems to have a bad cold this morning," he said finally, and both he and Raven laughed and laughed.

THOROUGHGOING

Raven came to Brown Bear's den and walked right into his lair. "Time for me to be moving on," he announced.

Brown Bear asked, "What will you say about your study here?"

Raven said, "Brown Bear is quite thoroughgoing."

Brown Bear said, "Try camping out for a while."

THE DREAM

Raven took Brown Bear's instruction to heart. He wandered a long time, from forests to upland meadows to icy lakes. Finally, with the pinfeathers under his beak getting sparse, he found an abandoned place in a tall spruce tree. He fixed it up, and students began to gather, including Porcupine, who had studied with Coyote Rōshi. Other early students were Woodpecker, Grouse, Badger, Owl, and Black Bear, who lived nearby. They would sit in a circle in the little meadow under the tall spruce. Raven would sit with them and afterwards he would respond to their questions, and at more formal teaching times, he would take a perch in the outer branches of an oak tree close by—the "Assembly Oak," as it came to be called. A stone outcropping served as an altar. One fine day Raven took his perch and said to the assembly:

"We are children in the dream of the Buddha Shākyamuni. He points to the center of our circle, and the King of the Gods sticks a blade of grass in the ground where he points. Our temple is established, and the Buddha smiles.⁸ The bedrock heaved up from beneath the turf there on the western edge of our circle is his presence. We bow and chant his sutras with his throngs of followers down through the ages. His incense fills the air. His teaching gives us pause. Stop here with him."

The circle was silent. Finally Owl called out, "Are you sure that's not just your dream?"

Raven bobbed his head. "It is my dream."

THE PIVOT

After zazen one evening Porcupine asked, "We examine turning points as our practice. What is the pivot on which this study turns?"

Raven said, "The large intestine."

Porcupine asked, "So it's all physical?"

Raven said, "All physical, all mental, all moral, all spiritual, all void, all material."

Porcupine thought about this, and finally asked, "What's the upshot?"

Raven said, "Trout in the pool, lilies on the bank."

EGO

During one of the early gatherings at Tallspruce, Badger asked Raven, "How can I get rid of my ego?"

Raven said, "It's not strong enough."

"But I'm greedy," Badger said insistently, "I'm self-centered and I tend to push other folks around."

Raven said, "Like I said."

THE SPIRIT OF ZEN PRACTICE

Relaxing with the others after zazen one evening, Owl asked, "What is the spirit of Zen practice?"

Raven said, "Inquiry."

Owl cocked his head and asked, "What do I inquire about?"

Raven said, "Good start."

TRUTH

One warm summer evening, Mole appeared in the circle for the first time, and during a lull in the discussion afterwards, he cleared his throat and asked, "Is it always right to tell the truth? Sometimes it does more harm than good."

Raven said, "Then it's not the truth." Mole sighed and was silent.

Owl spoke up and asked, "Then should I lie at such a time?"

Raven said, "Tell the truth."

ESSENTIAL NATURE

One early morning, Woodpecker flew in for a special meeting with Raven, and asked, "I've heard about essential nature, but I'm not sure what it is. Is it something that can be destroyed?"

Raven said, "That's really a presumptuous question."

Woodpecker ruffled her feathers a little and asked, "You mean I shouldn't question the matter?"

Raven said, "You presume there is one."

BEDROCK BUDDHA

Once a disciple of Yogi Rhino sent Raven a message, saying, "You just have a stone outcropping to represent the Buddha. You should come over here and meet a living Buddha."

Raven mentioned this in a talk and said, "If that fellow stays on with Yogi Rhino, he might realize that living Buddhas are all over the place, and yet our bedrock stands forth alone."

INSPIRATION

Raven took his perch on the Assembly Oak and said, "Some folks say that you must find your inspiration in your own heart. In a way that's true; you must find the place of peace and rest and carry out your life on that ground."

"It is also true that inspiration comes from somewhere else. The Buddha looked up from his seat under the Bodhi tree and noticed the morning star. With that he had his great realization. What did he realize? That's what we have to get at."

"The Buddha gave a broad hint about his new understanding when he said, 'Now I see that all beings are the Buddha.'⁹ All beings, all that exists, each and everything, precious in itself, coming forth saying, 'Here I am!'"

Grouse muttered something, and Raven said, "Grouse, did you have a question?"

Grouse said, "Here I am, but I don't think I'm so precious."

Raven said, "Cluck for us, Grouse." Grouse clucked.

Raven croaked.

KARMA

One evening, Gray Wolf appeared in the Tallspruce circle for the first time. After she had introduced herself, she said, "Is it all right to ask a question?"

Raven said, "Not only all right."

"Thank you," said Gray Wolf, "Maybe it's obvious to everyone else, but I don't understand the notion of karma. Could you explain it to me?"

Raven said, "Murder will out."

Gray Wolf said, "Sometimes crimes are never solved."

Raven said, "Help me not to live a lie."

PROPINQUITY

Cougar also came by that evening for the first time. After Raven's final response to Gray Wolf, he asked, "Then is karma just cause and effect?"

Raven said, "Propinquity propinks."

Cougar shook his head vigorously and said, "Sometimes it makes me irritated."

Raven said, "Your great chance."

THE PURPOSE OF ZEN PRACTICE

Badger attended the circle irregularly because of family responsibilities. One evening he was able to come for zazen and questions. He asked, "What is the purpose of Zen practice after all?"

Raven asked, "Do you have an inkling?"
Badger hesitated. "I'm not sure," he said.
Raven said, "Doubts dig up the Blue Planet."

BUDDHIST TERMS

After zazen one evening, Woodpecker asked, "I'd like to understand basic Buddhist terms, but I'm not sure that would help my practice. What do you think?"

Raven said, "They help us sort out our vows."
Woodpecker asked, "Then they're a kind of appropriate means?"¹⁰
Raven said, "Like the rain."

BROWN BEAR'S PURPOSE

That same evening, Porcupine asked, "What did Brown Bear have in mind when he took up his role of teacher?"¹¹

Raven said, "To make little girls ask questions."
Porcupine said, "Don't patronize me, Rōshi. My question is: 'What did Brown Bear have in mind when he took up the role of teacher?'"
Raven bobbed his head. "Excellent! Excellent!"
Porcupine stamped her foot. "That's not an answer!"
Raven said, "He didn't have answers in mind."

MAINTENANCE

Mallard attended meetings for a while before asking her first question: "Aren't we wasting time just sitting here while the Blue Planet goes to hell?"

Raven asked, "Do you waste your time eating?"
"Is that all it is," Mallard asked, "Just personal maintenance?"
Raven said, "Mallard maintenance, lake maintenance, juniper maintenance, deer maintenance."

BUDDHA

The next evening, Woodpecker spoke up and said, "I'd like to follow up on Buddhist terms. Let's start with the basic one. What is Buddha?"

Raven said, "I won't say."
"Oh, come on!" Woodpecker exclaimed.
Raven let out a croak and flew up into the Assembly Oak.

DELUSION

Another time Woodpecker asked, "What can you say about delusion?"

Raven said, "Juniper bush."
Woodpecker said, "How is the juniper bush a delusion?"
Raven said, "It shades me on a warm afternoon."
Woodpecker thought a moment and then asked, "Then naming things is delusion?"
Raven said, "Just so you know the risks."

MYTHOLOGY

Raven took his students to see Stag Sensei, who taught Kung-fu at Cedarford. Stag gave a little talk and showed them some of the exercises. Then in the Founder's Glade they bowed before a large stone in the form of Bodhidharma.

Back home that evening, Porcupine asked, "Was Bodhidharma really the founder of Kung-fu?"¹²

Raven said, "That depends on your mythology."

Porcupine asked, "What is your mythology, Rōshi?"

Raven said, "Open."

ENLIGHTENMENT

One day when they were sitting around having a snack, Woodpecker asked Raven, "What is enlightenment?"

Raven said, "I won't deny it."

Badger asked, "What will you affirm?"

Raven said, "Containment."

Badger said, "What kind of containment?"

Raven asked, "What about you?"

Woodpecker hesitated.

Raven said, "The moon is not on the fringes."

DEATH

Mole came to Raven privately and said, "We haven't talked about death very much. I'm not concerned about where I will go, but watching so many family members die, I'm wondering what happens at the point of death?"

Raven sat silently for a while, and then said, "I give away my belongings."

THE HOLY SPIRIT

Reverend Crane invited Raven and his students to an ecumenical service at The Little Church in the Grotto. Afterwards, the Tallspruce community was abuzz about the experience. The next evening, Owl asked, "Is the Holy Spirit something like Buddha nature?"

Raven said, "The two ideas are similar."

Owl said, "Then Christianity and Zen are somehow linked."

Raven said, "No, not at all, they are totally different and distinctly separate."

Owl was silent for a moment. Then he asked, "How are they different?"

Raven said, "Their ideas of idea are different."

Owl asked, "How are their ideas of idea different?"

Raven said, "They're like two pots, one clay and one iron. Drop them from the same height and the clay pot breaks into smithereens and the iron pot just bounces and goes *clunk!*"

VERY SPECIAL

In a group munching grubs one afternoon, Mole remarked, "The Buddha Shākyamuni was very special, wasn't he! I'm sure there has never been anyone like him."

Raven said, "Like the madrone."

Mole asked, "How is the madrone unique?"

Raven said, "Every madrone leaf." Mole was silent.

Porcupine asked, "How does the uniqueness of every madrone leaf relate to Zen practice?"

Raven said, "Your practice."

METAPHYSICS

That evening, Owl said, "I'm still thinking about our experience at the Little Church in the Grotto. Can a Buddhist be a Christian?"

Raven said, "Love thy neighbor."

Owl asked, "Can a Christian be a Buddhist?"

Raven said, "There are lots of them."

Owl asked, "Aren't you bypassing a conflict in metaphysics?"

Raven asked, "What has metaphysics got to do with it?"

Owl asked, "What is the antecedent of *it*?"

Raven said, "Good move, Owl."

FIRST PERSON SINGULAR

Wolverine came by unannounced one evening in early autumn.

"Hello," said Raven, "I'm Raven."

Wolverine said, "The Rōshi is meeting this one for the first time."

Raven said, "Is that so? What happened to the first person singular?"

Wolverine said, "No-self has appeared."

Raven said, "Could've fooled me."

VENERATION AND WORSHIP

Woodpecker said, "I'm like Owl, still thinking about our visit to the Little Church in the Grotto. I wonder, what's the difference between veneration and worship?"

Raven said, "One makes your tummy warm, the other doesn't."

Woodpecker asked, "Which is which?"

Raven said, "Not my business."

MAKE SENSE

One evening Raven took his perch on the Assembly Oak and said, "I worked with Jack Rabbit Rōshi for a long time, and there were certain things in his teaching that troubled me. I never asked about them, and finally I just came to the end and left. I think now that if I had spoken up sooner it might have helped us both. So now, I would ask you, is there anything in our program that troubles you?"

There was a long silence. Finally Turkey, a visitor that evening, spoke up. "I've been wondering," she said, "why it is that you don't have more song birds in your community?"

Raven said, "Maybe they're content just to inspire us from the trees."

Turkey asked, "How can they be inspired?"

Raven said, "Make sense."

THE NEW DISCUSSION LEADER

At the end of an evening meeting, Raven announced, "The Assembly Oak will preside tomorrow night."

Woodpecker said, "This I'll have to see."

Next night Raven appeared at his usual place in the circle.

Woodpecker said, "You said the Assembly Oak would preside tonight."

Raven said, "I'm here, but I forgot my notes."



Notes

1. Raven is referring to the Mahayana account of the Buddha's realization story, of which there are two versions. The first, in which the Buddha exclaims, "Now I see that all beings are the Tathāgata. Only their delusions and preoccupations keep them from realizing that fact!" is derived from the *Hua-yen ching*. See Thomas Cleary, *The Flower Ornament Scripture*, 3 vols. (Boulder: Shambhala, 1984-1987), II: 314-315. The other version is derived from Dōgen Kigen's *Hotsumujōshin (Developing the Supreme Mind)*, which has the Buddha exclaim, "At this moment, I and all beings have attained the Way!" See Kōsen Nishiyama and John Stevens, trans., *Shōbōgenzō: The Eye Treasury of the True Law*, 4 vols. (Tokyo: Nakayama Shōbō, 1977), II: 122.

2. Jack Rabbit summarizes the classical version of the Buddha's words on this realization, which are too long to quote in full here. See Hajime Nakamura, *Gotama Buddha* (Los Angeles: Buddhist Books International, 1977), pp. 58-60.

3. Prairie Dog's words do not have a source in accounts of the Buddha's realization, so far as I can determine.

4. I like to think that Brown Bear is echoing Stevenson:

The children sing in far Japan,
The children sing in Spain,
The organ with the organ man
Is singing in the rain.

Robert Louis Stevenson, *A Child's Garden of Verses*, in *The Works of Robert Louis Stevenson* (New York: Walter J. Black, n.d.), p. 972.

5. *Zazen* is the Japanese term, now naturalized, for seated, focused meditation.

6. "Turning points" refers to *kōans*, themes of Zen practice to be made clear.

7. *Mu* is the Japanese pronunciation (and probably the ancient Chinese pronunciation) of a Chinese word meaning "No; does not have." It is found in the story, "A monk asked Chao-chou in all earnestness, 'Has the dog Buddha nature or not?' Chao-chou said, 'Mu.'" This is often the first case taken up in Zen study. See Robert Aitken, *The Gateless Barrier: The Wu-men kuan (Mumonkan)* (San Francisco: North Point, 1990), p. 7.

8. Raven seems to be echoing a Zen Buddhist folk story about the Buddha and Indra. "When the Buddha was walking with his disciples, he pointed to the ground and said, 'This spot would be a good place to build a sanctuary.' Indra, Emperor of the gods, took a blade of grass and stuck it into the ground, and said, 'The sanctuary is built.' The Buddha smiled." See Thomas Cleary, *Book of Serenity* (Hudson, NY: Lindisfarne Books, 1990), p. 17.

9. See Note 1.

10. Woodpecker, with her interest in terminology, had already picked up on the expression, "appropriate means" (*upāya* in Sanskrit), a reference to the way of teaching that fits the time, place, and the person involved.

11. Porcupine's question seems reminiscent of the stock question in Zen literature, "What is the reason Bodhidharma came from the West?" See D. T. Suzuki, *Essays in Zen Buddhism: Second Series* (New York: Samuel Weiser, 1976), pp. 225-253.

12. Bodhidharma (died c. 532) is thought to have brought Dhyāna Buddhism from India to China and established it as Ch'an (Zen), and is also thought to have founded such martial arts as Kung-fu.

