

Koans for Interesting Times

May you live in interesting times.
- old Chinese curse

When Enkakuji temple was destroyed in fire in 1374, the Buddhist and Confucian books that its founder had brought from China were reduced to ashes. Priests from a nearby shrine came to Enkakuji, concerned about the tragic loss of these Tang and Song dynasty texts.

Fumon, the master of Enkakuji, said to them, "None of the texts have been burned."

"Then where are they?", asked a priest doubtfully.

The teacher drew a circle and said, "They are in here."

The priests didn't understand, and one of them asked, "Would you show us the Tang edition of the Mahavairochana Sutra?"

Fumon held up one hand. The priests didn't know what to make of this.

Another of them asked, "Will you show us the later translations of the Lotus Sutra?"

Fumon held up one hand.

A Confucian scholar asked to see a copy of the Four Confucian Classics, and Fumon again held up his hand.

Then a teacher of the Shingon school asked, "What is this supposed to mean?"

Fumon said, "The covers got burned, but you can still hold the texts in your hand."

Vimilakirti said, "I am sick because the whole world is sick."

Yunmen said, "The whole world is medicine."

Touzi said, "You've hit a barrier and can't find your way home. If you go forward you'll fall into the hands of the angry gods. If you retreat you'll slip into the hell of the hungry ghosts. If you go neither forward nor backward, you'll drown in dead water. What will you do?"

A samurai came to see a teacher, who asked him, "You're going into the bath, stark naked. A hundred enemies in armor, with bows and swords, appear all around you. How will you meet them? Will you crawl and beg for mercy? Will you show your warrior birth by fighting to the death? Or does a person of the Way get some special holy grace?"

The samurai said, "Let me win without surrendering and without fighting."

Linji said, "Face the world and walk crosswise."

One day an old warrior came to have an interview with his teacher. The warrior said, "Tianlong taught the Dharma with a single finger. But even if I lost both my arms on the battlefield, I could teach it with one leg," and he lifted up his right leg.

The teacher grabbed it and pushed it away, asking, "And when you have no leg, what will you teach with?"

The warrior lifted his eyebrows and blinked his eyes.

"And when you lose your eyes, what then?"

The warrior started to open his mouth, but the teacher covered his mouth, asking, "When you lose your mouth, then what?"

The old warrior couldn't answer.

Preach the Dharma for this old warrior.

Great Ancestor Ma said, "Benefit what cannot be benefited, do what cannot be done."

In ancient times it was the custom, when a new house was being built, to write a charm for the protection of the building and nail it to the ridgepole. Someone once asked a teacher, "Our great temple has been built, but there is still no charm on the ridgepole. Would you write a charm so that there will never be a disaster to the building?" The teacher called for paper and ink, and wrote a single word.

What is the one-charm?