

Man Gong's Net

One day, Son¹ Master Man Gong sat on the high rostrum and gave the speech to mark the end of the three-month winter retreat. "All winter long you monks have practiced very hard. That's wonderful! As for me, I had nothing to do, so I made a net. This net is made out of a very special cord. It is very strong and can catch all buddhas, ancestors, and human beings. It catches everything. How do you get out of this net?"

Some students shouted.

Others hit the floor or raised a fist.

One said, "The sky is blue, the grass is green."

Another said, "Already out. How about you, great zen master?"

From the back of the room a monk shouted, "Don't make a net!"

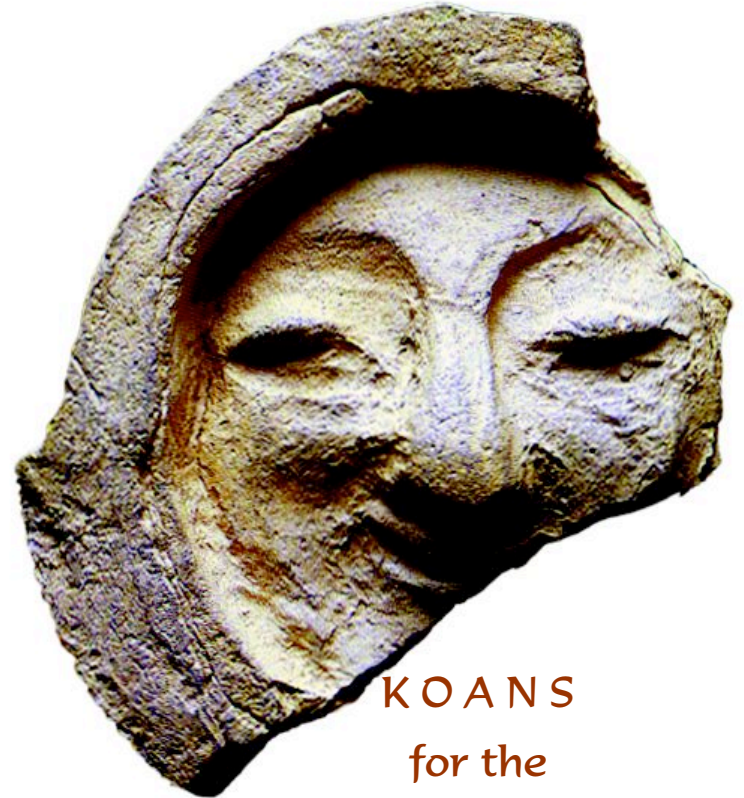
Many answers were given, but to each Man Gong only replied, "Ah ha! I've caught a BIG fish!"

So how do you get out of Man Gong's net?

Hungry Buddha

Does the Buddha still eat the offerings that are made to him?

¹ Son is the Korean pronunciation of the character pronounced Chan in China and Zen in Japan ~ This koan is from the contemporary Son teacher Seung Sahn and is about his grandfather in the Dharma



KOANS
for the
ALL HALLOWS
RETREAT

Joan Sutherland
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The Song Finds the Singer

In a place called Barunga in the Northern Territory of Australia, there was a traditional singer named Maralung. The ghost of a master song man named Balanjirri and a bird named Bunggridj-Bunggridj gave Maralung his songs. Balanjirri lived so long ago that nothing is known of his life.

In the outback you see mysterious moving lights, which are thought of as spirit lights called Minmin. They have their own creation stories and dreaming and are considered dangerous. One night Maralung was sleeping, watching a Minmin light. The light was blue and green and white and fell down across the sky from West to East. Balanjirri and Bunggridj-Bunggridj appeared and set off after it. They followed the light and got a song there, and then they came into Maralung's camp. Balanjirri said, "Get up, I have a song to teach you." The dreamer woke up and the master taught him the song. The bird sang, too. The song was in the ghost language, so humans could sing it but only spirits could understand it. Maralung told the story:

He got those...what do you call them...corroboree sticks. They just appeared there. Oh ho. Fuck me dead. They were enormous those corroboree sticks. That didjeridu player, he sat down about as far from me as that bloody chair. Balanjirri called the didjeridu player "son". It wasn't a short didjeridu. It was enormous. And he played that didjeridu right there for me.

"Don't lose this song, you keep this one," said the old song man, "I sang this song for you. It's yours." He spoke kindly like that.

"All right."

"OK, you've got to remember it properly, this good song, this minmin light of yours."

He went back and I continued to sing after he'd left. But fucking silly bugger, I fell asleep. But don't you worry, I'll get it. Maybe one or two, three, four, five...if he shows me...six, seven, eight, nine, that's it.

So the next night Maralung dreamed again and it happened the same way. Again the master and the bird came into his dream and woke him and sang for him and again he fell asleep afterwards. But this time he remembered the song in the morning.²

Now, here is the question. Maralung knew the difference between dream and waking. So, was the master song man really there or not? How will you prove it?

Ghost Buddha

Linji said, "Buddha is not the object of our search; do not make Buddha your ideal aim. Do not make Buddha into a reality outside yourself. The image we have in our head of Buddha is not the Buddha. Such a Buddha is a shadow, a ghost, called Ghost Buddha, who can suck up your soul. That is why when we meet Ghost Buddha, we should cut off Ghost Buddha's head."

² The musicologist Alan Marett told John Tarrant this story when he came to a retreat in the bush outside Sydney. He recorded some of Maralung's songs, which are available on CD. The song in this story is called "Minmin Light."