

Mirror Zen

In medieval Japan, there was a great Zen convent called Tokeiji. The founding abbess had an awakening while meditating in front of a mirror, and so a giant mirror was placed in the meditation hall. It was used by generations of women, and it was the custom for those who had an awakening with the mirror to write a poem about their experience. These poems were taken up as koans by the other nuns. Here are some of those poems, and the koan questions that were asked about them.

Poem :

If the mind doesn't rest on anything, there's no clouding,
and talk of polishing the mirror is a fantasy.

Questions :

If the mind doesn't rest on anything, how will anything be seen
or heard or known or understood?

A mirror that doesn't cloud and needs no polishing—set it
before me now.

Poem :

As night falls, no more reflections in the mirror,
Yet my heart sees them clearly.

Question :

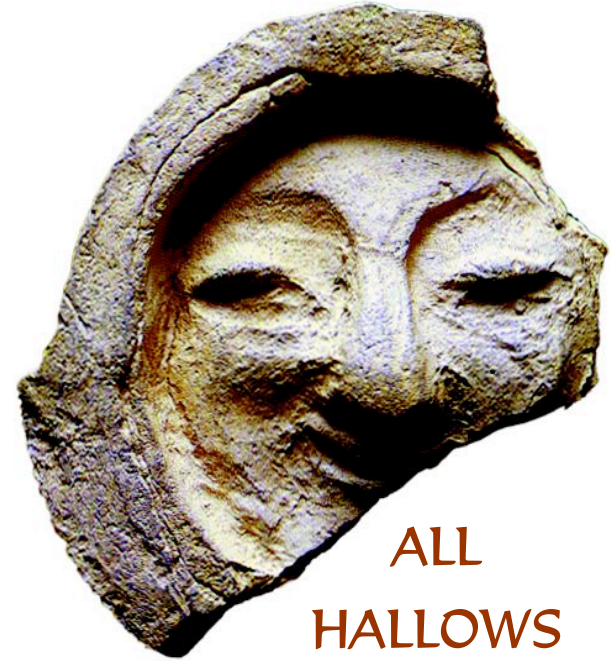
What is the color and form of the heart that sees in the dark?

Poem :

Heart clouded, heart unclouded—
Rising or falling, it's all the same body.

Questions :

Heart clouded, what is that?
Heart unclouded, how is that?
What is this rising and falling?



ALL
HALLOWS

KOANS

Santa Fe, New Mexico

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first : true persons of no rank

Say something without moving your lips or tongue

Do dogs really understand us as well as we think they do?

Show us an immovable tree in a heavy wind

Explain buddha nature to a dying friend

Let the stupa circumambulate you

Make the autumn wind rise from the palm of your hand

second : a few lines from Hanshan's poems

A tree older than the forest it stands in

Wind blows through ancient pines
The closer it comes, the better it sounds

Hanshan, Cold Mountain, was a great Chan poet of the Tang dynasty (8th- 9th century). Although he was from a noble family, he spent much of his life as a hermit in the mountains, possibly as a fugitive after a failed rebellion. His poems indicate that he was deeply awakened. He had a dharma buddy in the temple at the bottom of the mountain, a deceptively simple monk named Shide. Over the altar is Mayumi Oda's re-imagining of Shide as a woman.

walk : ancestors

The relics of a renowned teacher are in the stupa. Go get them and bring them here.

third : things as they are

Someone asked Zhimen, "What's it like when the lotus hasn't emerged from the water?"

Zhimen replied, "Lotus flower."

"What's it like after it emerges from the water?"

"Lotus petals," said Zhimen.

fourth : co-creating the world

Chan master Baoche was fanning himself. A monk approached him and asked, "The nature of wind is eternal, and there's no place it doesn't reach. Why, then, do you fan yourself?"

"Although you understand that the nature of the wind is eternal," Baoche replied, "you don't understand what reaching everywhere means."

"What does reaching everywhere mean?" asked the monk. Baoche just kept fanning himself. The monk bowed deeply.