

Shinji Shobogenzo, Book 2, Case 1

Written by News Administrator
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The Case (adapted):

Nangaku approached the 6th Patriarch.

The 6th Patriarch said, "Where do you come from?"

Nangaku replied, "Mount Su"

The Patriarch said, "What comes thus"

Nangaku could not answer. He stayed in the 6th Patriarch's service for 8 years. There was then a further conversation between them

Nangaku said, "when you said 'what comes thus', I could make no response"

The Patriarch said, "How do you understand the words?"

Nangaku said, "If I try to express it, I miss the mark"

The Patriarch said, "Do practice and realisation exist, or not?"

Nangaku said, "It is not that they don't exist, but they cannot be tainted"

The Patriarch affirmed him.

Commentary:

This is a very rich koan story, often used to illustrate the inseparability of practice and realisation. It isn't clear whether the 6th Patriarch's second statement is a question ('what comes thus?') or a statement ('what/suchness/the ineffable comes, thus'), but either way 'what' and 'it' are often used to signify thus-ness, the ineffable.

I would like however to focus on Nangaku's 'if I try to express it, I miss the mark'

Is this a deficiency, or not? Normally we imagine the word to be like an arrow, hitting the mark of the thing signified. But this is dualistic. Doesn't Nangaku 'fail' to hit the mark because the mark, the air, his sincere effort and the expression are all 'hitting' the arrow? And isn't this full expression?

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