

Book of Serenity, Case 91 (adapted)

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The Case:

A person said to Master Nansen, “Heaven, Earth and the self have the same root. All things, including the self, are one person”

Nansen pointed to a flower and said, “These days, people see this flower as if in a dream”

Commentary:

In a lot of the koan stories, a person will state what they believe to be Buddhist doctrine, and the Master will respond in an apparently bizarre way: with laughter perhaps, or a non sequitur. Why?

Ordinarily, we start off with a belief, and then try to make our experience correspond with that belief. So, we may believe that everything is empty, and then try to discern that emptiness, as if our actual experience is a dream. Or, we may, idiotically, aspire to personal enlightenment, and then keep checking our experience as it is against what we believe it should be.

But what we need to understand is that Buddhism isn't a matter of belief, but a matter of experience. The experience when our sense of self, our sense of separation, is cast off. Actual people - people like you - experience something and try to describe it. A picture, not a key, not a dogma. But over time, the language fossilises into doctrine. We always need to say something from our actual experience. Then, and only then, there is expression.