

# Zen Bow Article:

## Layman Pang's Beautiful Snowflakes

(This an abridged transcription of a sesshin teisho that Roshi Bodhin Kjolhede gave on koan number forty two of the *Hekiganroku* or *Blue Rock Record*, on December 6, 1992.)

*When Layman Pang took leave of Yakusan the latter asked ten Zen students to escort him to the temple gate to bid him farewell. The layman, pointing to the falling snowflakes, said, "Beautiful snowflakes; they fall nowhere. " Then one of the Zen students named Zenkaku [that is, "one who practices Zen"] said, "Then where do they fall?" The layman slapped him. Zenkaku said, "Even a layman shouldn't be so crude." The Layman said, "Though you call yourself a Zen student, Old Yama won't let go of you. " Zenkaku said, "What about you?" Again the Layman slapped him and said, "You look but you are blind; you speak but you are mute." [Setcho comments, "When Pang first spoke I would have made a snowball and hit him with it."]*

"When Layman Pang took leave of Yakusan the latter asked ten Zen students to escort him to the temple gate to bid him farewell." Yakusan must have had high regard for Layman Pang to send ten of his students with him, and he no doubt figured there'd be an opportunity for some Dharma exchange. The Layman, sure enough, looks out into the snowfall and says, "Beautiful snowflakes; they fall nowhere." So he casts out his line. Obviously he's not just muttering to himself here, thinking aloud, admiring the snowflakes. And one of these Zen students, Zenkaku, takes the bait and asks, "Then where do they fall?"

Snow can be disorienting. When you're looking out into a snowfall--and this can be when we have very small, light snow particles, or heavier flakes--it may appear as an optical illusion: everything is snowflakes. Sometimes, when it's windy, you can't tell whether they're going down or sideways, or even up. While driving a car at night, the headlights can seem to be sucking up the snow.

There is a passage in the *Surangama Sutra*, one of the great Mahayana sutras, that says: "Swiftly flowing water, when looked at from afar, appears still." We know that when we look at a river from a plane, it's just a ribbon. The same with a waterfall: when flying over Niagara Falls, we see just a little white smudge. There's this wonderful photograph, one of the most famous in the world, of the earth as seen from the moon: this beautiful, luminous, green-and-blue globe, partly obscured by white clouds. Seeing this, one can so easily be moved by the unity, the wholeness, of this earth. At



the same time, our planet is teeming with billions of people. We are a blizzard of sentient beings moving about through our busy lives. Where are we all going? If we get back far enough and look at it from the big perspective, we're not going anywhere; we're all here together. Where do we need to go? Where could we go? But now try telling someone who's shoveling snow from his front walk, bent over, huffing and puffing, that snowflakes fall nowhere! So from what perspective is Layman Pang speaking here? Not the same perspective, apparently, as this young monk.

So the monk steps forward. "Then where do they fall?" The Layman slaps him. This is one of the points of the koan; what did that slap mean? Was he answering his question? Was there something about his question the Layman didn't like? Did he think the monk was being impudent? Well, Zenkaku, obviously no great vessel of the Dharma, says "Even a layman shouldn't be so crude." Actually, he *is* a vessel of the Dharma, but it hasn't been filled yet. Or rather, it's too full.

We can see here the dichotomy in ancient China between the rank of monks and that of laymen. In this statement, "Even a layman shouldn't be so crude," Zenkaku shows his sense of superiority: "We can't expect much of lay people, true, but at least they could manage to be polite to us venerable ones..." To this the Layman announces, "Though you call yourself a Zen student, Old Yama won't let go of you." Yama refers to Yamaraja, who in Buddhist mythology is the Lord of the Dead. According to this myth, when we die we go before the forbidding Yamaraja, and he holds up "the mirror of karma" to us. Depending on what this mirror reflects back--based on all of our actions, thoughts and words of the past--we go either to heaven or to hell. This image of rebirth is one of these rich, concrete renditions of spiritual doctrine that

appeal to the popular mind. "Though you call yourself a Zen student, Old Yama won't let go of you." How can he let go of us as long as we hold fast to his world of death, a world split off from life?

But Zenkaku still hasn't got it, and he says, "What about you?" How might he have said those words? Then the Layman slaps him again. "You look but you are blind; you speak but you are mute." If only Zenkaku had really had his eyes and mouth open, they would have filled with snow and left everyone in peace.

Then Setcho comments, "When Pang first spoke I would have made a snowball and hit him with it." Oh these Zen masters, they're so playful. But is this just playfulness? What does he mean by that?

In this sesshin we have been blessed by this marvelous snowfall. Snow can teach us so much. It is so eloquent. Its teaching is complete. There's the silence of snow, the silence of the world under a blanket of snow. Especially in a city, it's such a dramatic change. It's as if Mother Nature had thrown a blanket around a noisy child- hush-hush, hush-sh-sh ..." "Quiet, quiet, quiet now." So soothing, so quieting, and there's such power in this silence. We are humbled by a snowfall like this. We feel our smallness, and yet at the same time our togetherness. For all of our machines and technology and power and energy, processing and harnessing, a good heavy snowfall--such as we had last night and will have more of today--reduces, at least for a while, this big, noisy, urban machine. It puts it in its place. Everything is restored to purity. It all appears simple again. And everything's equal.

There's a saying, "Rain falls on the rich man and the poor man alike." So does snow. Every twig, every little protuberance on a car or a fence, everything gets its little dusting, its little cap of snow. All of the myriad forms are obliterated, and we are treated to a concrete, physical, and dramatic view of formlessness. No color either--pure white. What characteristics can you speak of when everything is buried under a blanket of snow? It all becomes like a clean slate or an empty canvas. Is this why it's so difficult to resist drawing pictures in the snow, or making angels with your arms and legs? You can do anything; you're free to begin anew, afresh.

Here is the verse:

*Hit him with a snowball! Hit him with a ball!  
Even the best will fail to reply.  
Neither heaven nor earth knows what to do.  
Eyes and ears are blocked with snow.  
Even the blue-eyed monk can't explain.*

Hit this Layman Pang with a snowball. Shut him up. Aim for his mouth!

While you're at it, bury him in it! Make a snowman out of him. Don't let him defile this great, pure beauty with words.

"Even the best will fail to reply." Why? What can you say when you stand in a deep snowfall? What can you say that can measure up to the immensity that surrounds you? What can you say that won't stain that snow?

"Eyes and ears are blocked with snow." In sesshin we all become snowmen; we come in, we close these doors, and we block our eyes and ears with snow--with Muuu. *Who* is this snowman? "Even the blue-eyed monk can't explain." The blue-eyed monk is Bodhidharma. He's the founder of the Zen sect, and even he can't explain? Why not? I don't know.

There is a wonderful poem by Wallace Stevens, whose dates are 1879 to 1955. We won't find many poems outside of Zen that are as explicitly Zen-like. It's called "The Snowman":

One must have a mind of winter  
To regard the frost and the boughs  
Of the pine-trees crusted with snow;

And have been cold a long time  
To behold the junipers shagged with ice,  
The spruces rough in the distant glitter

Of that January sun; and not to think  
Of any misery in the sound of the wind,  
In the sound of a few leaves,

Which is the sound of the land  
Full of the same wind  
That is blowing in the same bare place

For the listener, who listens in the snow,  
And, nothing himself, beholds  
Nothing that is not there and the nothing that is.

Who is this snowman? What type of person is it who will take note of each single snowflake as it falls on her sleeve? What is that mind? "Oh, look at this one ... and this one--incredible! ... And *this* one!" Each one is different, and yet it's all *snow*. SNOW!

Where does this snow come from? Where does it go?

What *is* this snow?

What is Mu?

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