

## LAY ZEN

[A revised version of Jeff Shore's Introduction to *The Sayings of Layman P'ang*:  
*A Zen Classic of China* (Shambhala, 2009), with illustrations added.]

Layman P'ang, a towering figure of lay Zen, has been venerated in Asia for well over a thousand years. Recently, the rest of the world has been embracing him as well. The title song of Van Morrison's 1990 album, *Enlightenment*, opens with a refrain about chopping wood and carrying water. Borrowed from one of Layman P'ang's most famous poems, it expresses the Layman's newfound spiritual insight in terms of his daily actions.

How could someone with no social standing or monastic rank inspire his countrymen for over a thousand years, and why does he stir people on the other side of the globe today? The following remarks provide background to better understand and appreciate the sayings of Layman P'ang – and maybe even allow us to catch a glimpse of the man himself.

Classic Zen histories state:

*The great solitary one reigns West-of-the-River,  
The one on top of the rock rules South-of-the-Lake.  
Many travel from one to the other.  
Anyone who has not encountered these two great men  
Is considered an ignoramus.*

This was the scene at the time of Layman P'ang. "The great solitary one" refers to the Chinese Zen master Ma-tsu; "The one on top of the rock" is the literal translation of Shih-t'ou, whose name is taken from the flat rock on which he built his hut. These were the two great masters whom P'ang encountered.

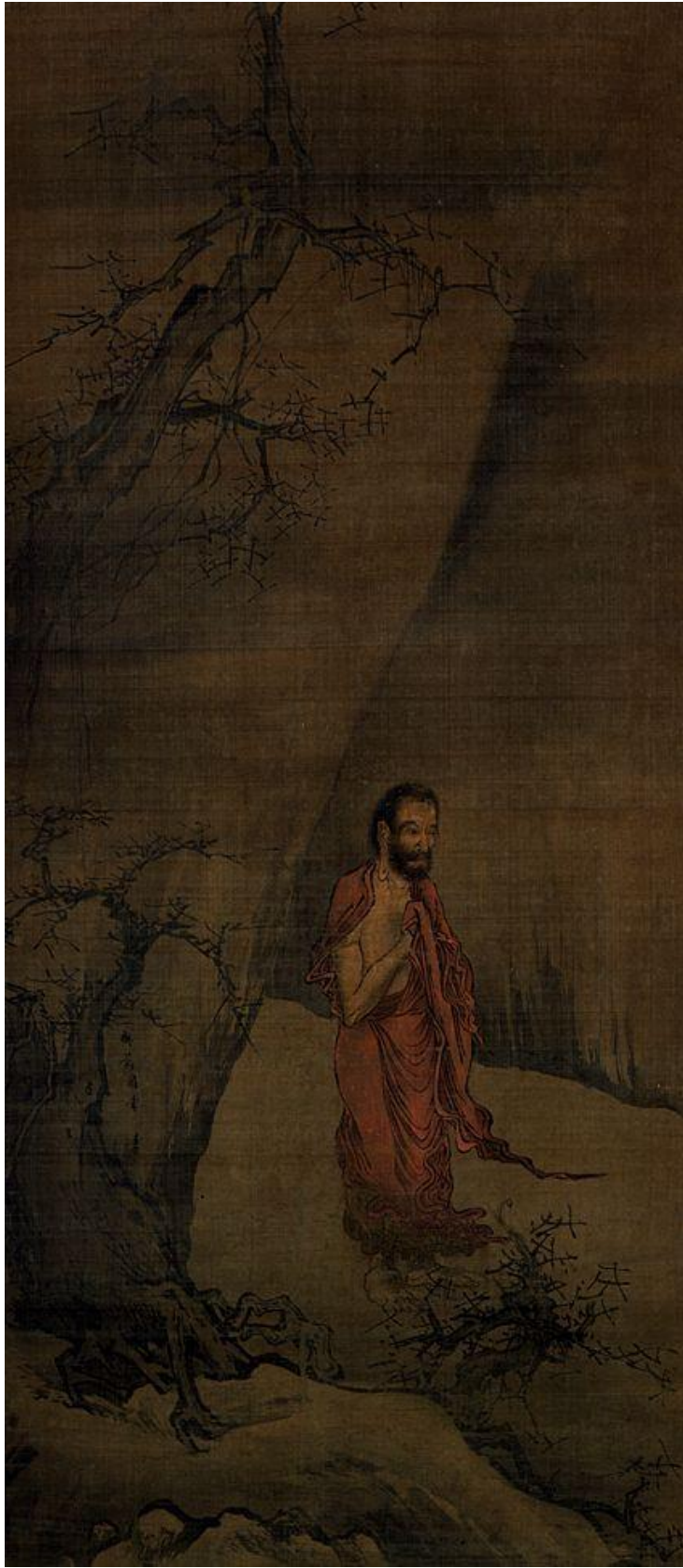
Ma-tsu and Shih-t'ou were not just two exceptional monks living during an exceptional time in Chinese history; from them descends the teaching that

flowered into what we now call the Rinzai and Soto schools of Zen Buddhism. And as we will see, the Layman truly encountered (not simply met) both of them.

The Layman naturally followed in these masters' footsteps by going beyond them: "Realization equaling the master's diminishes its worth by half; only realization surpassing the master's is worthy of continuing the lineage." This statement of master Po-chang (Jpn.: Hyakujo), a leading dharma heir of Ma-tsu, is celebrated in the Zen tradition for expressing what is required of a worthy disciple.

The realization at issue – and what is vividly disclosed at the heart of Layman P'ang's exchanges with others – is the realization of Buddhism's basic truth of no-self (Pali: *anattan*; Skt.: *anatman*). In the Indian Buddhist tradition, this truth was disclosed through meticulous meditations on and analyses of what constitutes "the world," within and without. The Zen tradition is known for directly pointing out no-self and developing the koan to foster abrupt awakening. Layman P'ang manifests this living truth in your face, stripped of Buddhist or Zen jargon, unmistakably clear and unadorned, for all to see. A pity that he did not become a monk and have plenty of worthy disciples to continue his lineage? Perhaps we are all his worthy disciples. The fundamental Way of the Buddha has always flowed freely and been available to all people. Nothing, institutional or otherwise, can really obstruct it.

A number of pivotal figures set the stage for the practice of Layman P'ang and for our practice today. Let's take a look at them.



*[Gotama Buddha coming down the mountain of his awakening, by Liang-kai]*

Despite his father's best attempts to shield him from the realities of life twenty-five hundred years ago, the layman called Gotama in Pali (Skt.: Gautama) left all behind and followed the emerging tradition of wandering ascetics known as *samana* (Skt.: *sramana*). After Gotama's awakening, the five ascetics who had formerly practiced austerities with him now followed his Path and, under his tutelage, realized it for themselves. Only then did they take a very simple ordination. According to the Pali canon, there were then in the world six *arahant* (Skt.: *arhat*). The seventh *arahant* in the world was Yasa, the son of a wealthy family. His father, mother, and wife all entered the Path as lay disciples.



*[Vimalakirti, by Kano Tsunenobu]*

*When the great layman Vimalakirti is asked about his illness, he responds that as long as living beings are ill, his illness is prolonged. And when the illness of all living beings comes to an end, then his illness will also end. Just as loving parents share in the suffering of their child when ill, and feel relieved when their child recovers, so does the Bodhisattva (awakening being) suffer out of compassion for all beings. And where does this “illness” come from? Vimalakirti states that a Bodhisattva’s illness itself arises out of Great Compassion.*

Another significant figure is Vimalakirti: According to Buddhist lore, he remained a householder with family, yet was so deeply awakened that he revealed the remaining blind spots of bodhisattvas and leading disciples of the Buddha. His emphasis on “being fully engaged in the affairs of an ordinary person without abandoning the dharma” clearly foreshadows Layman P’ang. The Mahayana sutra that tells the story even bears the name of this revered Indian layman. (Mahayana Buddhism, from which the Zen tradition emerged, can be credited with a major shift in focus from monastic to lay practice.)



*[The sixth patriarch cutting bamboo, by Liang-kai]*

In the Chinese tradition, around the year 671, Hui-neng, an illiterate layman who had formerly supported his mother by selling firewood, became the sixth patriarch of Zen. This dramatic transmission occurred in the context of a midnight meeting with the fifth patriarch in which Hui-neng received the dharma-sanction and Bodhidharma's robe and bowl. Hui-neng then departed, with angry monks chasing after him, for he was but an unlettered layman. Only about five years after this did Hui-neng have his head shaved and take formal vows.



*[Layman P'ang with his wife and daughter, attributed to Yüeh-shan]*

About one century later, the subject of the present study, Layman P'ang, did not take formal vows. Why?

The virtues of true renunciation are boundless. So are the vices that self brings to monastic and priestly life. The problems have been there since the



beginning, and they persist today. Layman P'ang's decision not to wear the black robe of the Buddhist monk and instead to continue wearing the white clothing of a layman was a virtual watershed for lay Buddhism. It ushered in a lay Buddhist tradition continuing to this day. A tradition that is not simply subservient to that of monks who have "left home" and who thus are automatically assumed to be "on the Way." Layman P'ang and his family pioneered a lay Buddhism that is itself the Way.

"Ordinary mind is the Way." This is one of the most famous formulations of Chinese Zen. In other words, all of our daily thoughts and deeds, "collecting firewood and carrying water" – without self-entanglement – are the very dharma we seek. No need for exalted states of mind or exalted robes; the "extraordinarily ordinary" is quite enough.

"Ordinary mind is the Way." The expression was first used by Ma-tsu. His renowned disciple Nan-ch'uan (Jpn.: Nansen) made it famous. Layman P'ang brought it home. Layman P'ang's decision to remain a layman has been lauded for well over a millennium. The P'ang family has become an exemplar of living Buddhism truly "at home," yet unconsumed by material or spiritual possessions.

Let us not forget, however, that it was the monk Shih-t'ou who asked Layman P'ang the question: "So, are you going to wear black or white?" Many of these anecdotes take up the notion of monastic versus lay life. To give just two examples, where the Layman's cap (a sort of headscarf) comes into play: Layman P'ang's old friend master Tan-hsia pulls off the Layman's cap and declares, "You look just like an old master to me." The Layman takes it back and places it on Tan-hsia's head with the words, "And you look just like a young coolie to me." What could Tan-hsia do but concur with a, "Yes, sir!"

On another occasion, Tse-ch'uan states, "Even though you may prevail, you'd still be wearing that silly head scarf." The Layman takes it off and responds, "Now I look just like the teacher." What could "the teacher" do but laugh out loud?

These playful encounters are compelling precisely because they are done in all seriousness. To take them as mere slapstick is to miss the point. They are stunning illustrations of dharma-at-play – of no-self awakening and

compassion working anytime, anywhere. P'ang was a layman, but he was a consummate master of this "play," often giving monks and masters a taste of their own medicine.

Who is this guy? Zen texts tend to be brief when it comes to biographies in general, and thus little detail is given about Layman P'ang's life. We must read between the lines and fill in the necessary details from our own experience. One dialogue states that Layman P'ang "became concerned about the nature of the human condition and sought to understand the reality of it." In other words, he was no different from you or me. For decades as a family man he practiced Buddhism diligently. Eventually he went in search of the leading masters of the time. Encountering Shih-t'ou, he asked, "What about someone who has no connection with the ten thousand dharmas [i.e., all things within and without]?" A word game? An intellectual puzzle? Or perhaps the one and only question remaining for Layman P'ang after long years of intense practice as a householder?

Who, after all, is the one remaining free, unattached to anything? Where is this one in our daily actions, confusions, ups and downs? Isn't this an essential question we all need to be clear about? Is there a more crucial question for us today?

Genuine religious seekers such as Layman P'ang often have a burning question, a great doubt that drives them beyond self: What is the source of suffering? Who am I? What is Bright Virtue? Who is the one not attached to anything?

In the Layman's question can you discern self-entanglement at the end of its rope? Shih-t'ou did. Thus he adroitly placed his hand over P'ang's mouth. With this wordless yet most eloquent "answer," Layman P'ang is undone, catching a glimpse of what lies beyond self. (This is the same Shih-t'ou who, when asked by a monk about liberation, replied: "Who binds you!")

The Layman stayed for a time with Shih-t'ou, then went to see Ma-tsu. Does P'ang recount his experiences with Shih-t'ou, does he mention his decision to remain a layman? Perhaps. But all that Layman P'ang's sayings and exchanges hand down to us is the question he asked. The very same one: "What about someone who has no connection with the ten thousand

dharmas?”

With Ma-tsu’s response the Layman’s final knot comes undone: “I will tell you when you have drunk down the waters of the West River in one gulp.” In other words: “Swallow the universe, then you’ll know!”

The Layman’s question – and Ma-tsu’s answer – soon became famous in Zen circles. Master Chao-chou (Jpn.: Joshu), who was about thirty years of age when the Layman passed away, was later asked the same question. He responded, “Not a person.”

In the few other exchanges between the Layman and Ma-tsu recorded here, the Layman continues plugging away, resolving remaining doubts. For example: “How is it that water has neither bone nor muscle, yet is able to hold up a big barge? What is the underlying principle?” He is not asking about shipbuilding or the physical properties of water. And Ma-tsu continues pulling the plug: “For my part there is neither water nor boat. So, what is this bone and muscle you speak of?”

Some time later, when his work with Ma-tsu was done, the Layman visited master Yueh-shan at his monastery. When the Layman departed, the master sent a group of new monks to see him off at the gate. The Japanese Zen master Hakuin mentions that this shows Yueh-shan’s high regard for Layman P’ang, that he honored him like a great master. It was also a precious opportunity for the monks. It happened to be snowing. The Layman points at the falling snow and exclaims: “The snow is so beautiful, each flake lands in the same place.” What is he saying to these recent arrivals accompanying him to the edge of the temple grounds, where he will return to the world and they will return to the monastic regimen? To rephrase it: “What wondrous snow – each flake falling into place.” With self-delusion – that is, the delusion of an independently existing self – gone, each and every thing falls into place of its own accord.

One of the monks asks, “Where does it fall?” – and the Layman slaps him. On this point, here is a comment from case 42 of the koan collection known as *The Blue Cliff Record*: “As soon as [Layman P’ang] opened his mouth, I’d just have made a snowball and pelted him with it!”

Such critique is actually profound praise, and much more. Keeping the

tradition on its toes, vital and alive.

A number of formal koans were eventually culled from Layman P'ang anecdotes. How did this koan tradition develop, and how is it related to these earlier, spontaneous encounters? Very simply, the Zen tradition holds that the early patriarchs and masters were religious seekers of the highest caliber; they already were primed and ready, so that a brief statement or even just a gesture was enough to evoke realization. An excellent example is the exchange between Bodhidharma and Hui-k'o (Jpn.: Eka), who became the second patriarch of Chinese Zen. This encounter constitutes the beginning of the Chinese Zen tradition and is thus foundational (see case 41 of Zenkei Shibayama's *Gateless Barrier* [Shambhala, 2000]).

Whatever the historical facts, Layman P'ang's encounters with Shih-t'ou and Ma-tsu presented here follow the same pattern. The Layman already had his living koan, that is, his religious problem, burning doubt, ultimate challenge. Such koans have been called *genjo-koan*, the koan manifest right here and now. They spontaneously – inevitably – emerge, often from organic encounters. And they lead to resolute inquiry into the nature of self, that is, to the great matter of birth-and-death: “What about someone who has no connection with the ten thousand dharmas?”

Eventually Zen became more or less the state religion. In the Sung Dynasty people from all walks of life were visiting Zen masters. Even if they had a sincere interest, their own religious doubt tended to be vague and unfocused. So, according to the Zen tradition, out of great compassion the masters offered earlier, spontaneous encounters now as set koan cases to help plumb the depths, or to test their realization. Masters also commented on these encounters, offering their own answer when one was not given, or their alternative answer when one had been given.

Consider one exchange which has the Layman being asked the point of Bodhidharma's coming from the West. This question was becoming part of the lingua franca in Zen circles, a set way of inquiring into the ultimate truth of the Zen teaching. The Layman's laconic response: “Does anyone remember it?” When Ma-tsu was asked the same question, he responded: “Right now what's the point [in asking]?” They actually “answered” the question so

exquisitely that it may sound as though they evaded it altogether.

Eventually an elaborate body of prose – and poetic – commentary on koans developed, of which *The Blue Cliff Record* is an outstanding example. Religious verse goes back well before the Buddhist tradition. The earliest Buddhist accounts contain poetry; the *Thera-gathas* and *Theri-gathas*, verses of the elder monks and nuns, are fine examples of this genre in early Buddhism. *The Sayings of Layman P'ang* presents several of his poems, some of which seem to have been composed on the spot at decisive points in his life. Poetry is a natural form of religious expression, particularly suited to the subject; and it became particularly prominent in Chinese Buddhism, with its rich literary tradition. The statement attributed to Bodhidharma, “Not relying on words and letters,” comes from a four-line poem in classical Chinese.

The use of koan cases developed over the centuries, culminating in the curricula used today in Rinzai monasteries in Japan. The present systems go back around two hundred years. Layman P'ang well reminds us, however, that what we need most is to rouse our own, *living* koan and see it through to the end – whether we're in a monastery or not.

The essential point is not lay or monastic. Layman P'ang was no more attached to lay life than he was to a monastic or priestly one. His life is a revelation of the basic Buddhist truth that, whoever we are and whatever our station, there is finally only one thing to renounce: self. This is no more accomplished through shaving one's head, changing clothes, and taking vows than it is lost in living a family life, making bamboo utensils, and visiting friends.



*[In the cool of the evening, by Kusumi Morikage]*

The difficulties and demands of our lay life, however, are real and need to be faced. The Layman's sacrifices, and those of his spouse and children, are not described in the text. We must fill in those details, with utmost care, from our own experience.

Gotama Buddha's sacrifice for the liberation of all beings is worthy of veneration. But what about renouncing one's family in order to seek the Way? That was not the way for Vimalakirti, nor for Layman P'ang. Nor is it the way for most of us today.

It bears repeating: The real question is not about being lay *or* monastic. It is about awakening to no-self and living in the world with compassion. To the extent that living a monastic or priestly life actually creates such conditions, it is a path worthy of respect. Just as a layperson's life is.

The contributions of laypeople throughout Buddhist history have been enormous. Early Buddhism would probably not have survived without lay support. Much great Zen culture was created by laypeople rather than by Zen

monks or priests. Just to give a few outstanding examples: the poetry, painting, and calligraphy of Wang Wei, the calligraphy and poetry of Su Tung-p'o, the painting of Liang-kai, Hasegawa Tohaku, and Miyamoto (Musashi) Niten, and the tea utensils such as the bamboo flower containers of Kobori Enshu.

To what extent was Layman P'ang inspired by the enlightened layperson tradition, and to what extent did he and his family help to create it? It is hard to say. Either way, *The Sayings of Layman P'ang* is the only Zen classic featuring a layperson. It provides a precious human image, especially for our modern, secular society. An unerring beacon for what we aspire to, and for what we truly are: in leaving no trace of self, we are fully involved in the work of the world.

It remains to be seen whether or not the precious monastic component of Zen will succeed outside Asia. Genuine monastic training is precious indeed. Layman P'ang, when his time was ripe, appears to have spent a good deal of time in monasteries. Today as well, for those who really want to get their toes wet, at least several months or years of practice in an authentic Zen monastery is strongly recommended.

In the modern world, however, lay Zen will naturally be the focus. It is just a matter of time until a real lay Zen springs forth among ordinary folks with ordinary minds, amidst householders around the globe. Indeed, the initial cultivation is already well underway.

Zen Buddhist retreats for laypeople in the West have been growing in frequency and numbers in recent years. Lay retreats have been held in Europe and the United States, blazing an authentic Zen path on home ground in the modern world, providing opportunities for real encounters with elder sisters and brothers in the dharma. Layman P'ang's descendants are everywhere.

Buddhism's fundamental goal has been described in the Pali canon as the cessation of this whole mass of suffering entangled in the grand "I am" conceit. The Layman expressed it this way in two stanzas of a poem:

*The will to survive must be killed off,  
Once it is killed off, there will be peace...*

*Aren't the esteemed sages  
Just regular people who've resolved this matter?*

Coming to the matter right in the midst of daily life, as Layman P'ang and many others have, I trust that you will find the place underfoot illumined anew. Don't despair that you are too busy with daily affairs! As we will see in upcoming retreats, leading Zen masters who developed koan Zen considered the world of lay practice as the perfect place to see through.

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