

The body is the bodhi tree
The mind is like a bright mirror's stand.
At all times we must strive to polish it
And must not let dust collect.
- Hongren

Bodhi originally has no tree
The bright mirror also has no stand
Fundamentally there is not a single thing
Where could dust arise?
-Shenxiu

This week, I sort of continued my investigation of anger and negative emotions in the context of this pair of poems -- curious to see how a particular moment of frustration or dissatisfaction might play out against the framing of these two different points of view.

Early on, I had sort of decided for myself that I didn't quite agree with either viewpoint, that if you really do see that the mirror has no stand (that there is no inherently existing self), that you would naturally turn back toward the hum-drum dusting activities of first poem. "Before enlightenment, chop wood carry water; after enlightenment, chop wood carry water" seemed more resonant, at least in the way it acknowledges the simple situation we find ourselves in -- no big dramas about dust, just a matter of looking after one's affairs with a bit of gratitude. So going in, I suppose my sense of the poems was a bit provisional -- not really sure how it would apply.

OK, so here's how it applied this week: Over the weekend, I attended a memorial service for a well-loved aunt-in-law. I had spent Christmas eve at her extended family gathering for the last 20+ years, but had missed the last one to be with my mom. I felt very sorry to have missed this last chance to be with her, and even felt a bit guilty. So I was sitting in the temple feeling shy, wondering when the gravity of the situation -- the real feeling of it -- would strike me. Actually, it happened as the casket passed us: the flower wreath on the casket started to slip until my father-in-law reached up reflexively to stop its fall. Somehow, that moment felt like a small gesture of acknowledgement, an acknowledgement between my husband's family and hers. And then it became clear that my concerns about missing the last Christmas party were not necessary, that I did not have to worry so much about looking out for every little thing, but that in some weird way, the world (including my aunt-in-law) was looking out for me. That is when the real meaning of her life and passing started to shine through for me.

It's an oddity how guilty feelings, a sense of "responsibility" can mask out any real engagement with life. So in this sense, I really do feel there is such a thing as dust. But the way to clear that dust is just to allow in the situation for what it really is -- I don't have to chase after the dust so much.