

The Guide to a Better Life, In Several Verses



Deep Dharma's Commentary on Shitou's *Inside the Grass Hut*

Introduction

Inside the Grass Hut is an autographical poem written by the Chinese monk Shitou around 750 CE. It is only 32 lines, explaining how Shitou became enlightened and acted thereafter as an enlightened one. Shitou is suggesting that we do the same. As you will see, his practice and its path are simple and direct—relax, be calm, meditate, study scripture, and train to realize No Self and emptiness by looking inward. Aspects of the poem are purely literary and metaphoric; other aspects are somewhat literal, in the nature of a guide to practice.

Shitou's grass-roofed hut is a small, unassuming meditation structure. As you can see in the photo of the historical site of the hut (*see* the commentary on Verse One, below), the site is an unlikely-looking one – a sloping rock ledge covered in grass and conifers, a spot that certainly seems “of no value” as Shitou puts it. When Shitou committed to living in (“met”) the hut he had no precious possessions or desire for fancy surroundings, he just wanted a place to relax, eat in peace, and then, conditions supporting it, to take a quick nap.

The meditation Shitou teaches in this poem is a simple matter of turning the light around to shine it inward, and being there, being there *just so*, watching the mind mindfully as it goes through its machinations toward realizing nothing is present and nothing is to be attained. “Just so” means being there in (and like) the stillness of the mountain and overgrowth, without adding any value to anything.

The grace and beauty of this poem lies in its emphasis on a simple practice, and in the elegance of its written style—exactly seven characters in each of the lines which, in its original Chinese, is arranged in 16 couplets:

石头草庵歌

吾结草庵无宝贝、饭了从容图睡快。
成时初见茆草新、破後还将茆草盖。
住庵人、镇常在。不属中间与内外。
世人住处我不住、世人爱处我不爱。
庵虽小、含法界。方丈老人相体解。
上乘菩萨信无疑、中下闻之必生怪。
问此庵、坏不坏。坏与不坏主元在。
不居南北与东西、基址坚牢以为最。
青松下、明窗内。玉殿朱楼未为对。
衲帔椽头万事休、此时山僧都不会。
住此庵、休作解。谁夸铺席图人买。
回光返照便归来、廓达灵根非向背。
遇祖师、亲训诲。结草为庵莫生退。
百年抛却任纵横、摆手便行且无罪。
千种言、万般解。只要教君长不昧。
欲识庵中不死人、岂离而今这皮袋。

In this commentary, first you will find the poem in two translations. The first is translated by Taigen Dan Leighton and Kazuaki Tanahashi (LT), the second by James Mitchell and Yulie Lou (MY). We have also

referenced an unpublished very literal translation by a friend, Miao Xu (X), in Singapore. It can be found in the End Notes.

Our commentary is based largely on the LT translation which divides the text into seven verses. In other translations, the poem is presented without divisions or in couplets (X), and in the ML, into five verses. In the next section of our commentary, the poem is analyzed line-by-line based on LT and supplemented by a commentary on its equivalent in the ML. Finally, there are End Notes about the (X) translation and notes on various translators and commentators.

This commentary isn't in the form of a personal essay, as is Ben Connelly's from the 2014 book, *Inside the Grass Hut, Living Shitou's Classic Zen Poem*, nor is it an academic/scholarly analysis, nor an exegetical commentary, rather it is an understanding of the text in a way we hope the reader will find helpful in practicing the dharma deeply and becoming a little more relaxed, a little calmer, and little more deeply committed to a simple meditative and mindful life.

Andy and Carl are indebted to the students who have studied the poem with them and offered their insights, many of which are included here.

The ML, which leans more to the colloquial than to the literary, is first presented side-by-side with the LT translation for inspiration and elucidation. There are great differences in the two translations, as is the case with the translation of any great poem or literary work. To really see the variability in translation, also contrast these with the X version – this will reveal the amount of rewriting and translational liberty that must be taken to translate this poem into English. Nonetheless, it is worth noting the differences in meaning and style rather than choosing one over the other. Often we combine observations inspired by the different translations, and add additional historical notes.

Two Suggestions

As suggested in the Connelly commentary, memorizing this short poem through recitation and chanting is a way to encourage you and Shitou to be one in the dharma. How better to practice with this great master?

As a practice, Carl and Andy suggest printing out a copy of this commentary. At the end of each of the line (or each verse if you prefer), ask: "What is the main point Shitou is making here?" Then add tags. After the first verse, for example, one answer could be tagged "impermanence" and another tag might be "simplicity." These tags will help keep you aligned with the basic themes that run through the poem.

Andy Cohen
Carl Jerome
February 2021

Inside the Grass Hut
Leighton/Tanahashi translation

Song of the Grass Shack
Mitchell/You translation

I've built a grass hut where there's nothing of value.
After eating, I relax and enjoy a nap.
When it was completed, fresh weeds appeared.
Now it's been lived in - covered by weeds.

The person in the hut lives here calmly,
Not stuck to inside, outside, or in between.
Places worldly people live, he doesn't live.
Realms worldly people love, he doesn't love.

Though the hut is small, it includes the entire world.
In ten square feet, an old man illumines forms and their nature.
A Great Vehicle bodhisattva trusts without doubt.
The middling or lowly can't help wondering;
Will this hut perish or not?

Perishable or not, the original master is present,
not dwelling south or north, east or west.
Firmly based on steadiness, it can't be surpassed.
A shining window below the green pines -
Jade palaces or vermilion towers can't compare with it.

Just sitting with head covered, all things are at rest.
Thus, this mountain monk doesn't understand at all.
Living here he no longer works to get free.
Who would proudly arrange seats, trying to entice guests?

Turn around the light to shine within, then just return.
The vast inconceivable source can't be faced or turned away from.
Meet the ancestral teachers, be familiar with their instruction,
Bind grasses to build a hut, and don't give up.

Let go of hundreds of years and relax completely.
Open your hands and walk, innocent.
Thousands of words, myriad interpretations,
Are only to free you from obstructions.
If you want to know the undying person in the hut,
Don't separate from this skin bag here and now.

I've built a grass shack with nothing of value inside.
After a good meal, I like to take a nice nap.
The grass thatching still looks new;
When it wears out, I'll add fresh thatch to the roof.
The person inside the shack is always present,
But you won't find him inside or out.
He doesn't hang out with worldly people,
And he doesn't like the things they like.
This little shack contains the entire universe,
And my physical body is integrated with it.

Great Bodhisattvas don't doubt my ideas,
Although humans may think them strange.
If you say that my hut looks shabby, I'll answer
That the One Mind abides right where it is.
East or west, north or south,
A solid foundation is what counts.
With green pines hanging over the roof
And bright windows in the walls, not even
a royal palace can compare with my shack.
With a monk's robe over my shoulders
And a hood over my head, I've got no worries at all.

It's not that I praise myself for living here,
Like some merchant pushing his product.
It's just that when the twilight comes,
My mind is limitless from front to back.

When I met my teacher and heard his words,
I decided to build myself a hut and live in it.
Disregarding social constraints,
I'll do just as I please.

Still, whatever people will tell you,
My real goal is to wake folks up.
If you want to meet the "person" in the shack,
You've got to look after the physical side first.

Commentary -- Inside the Grass Hut

Verse One

I've built a grass hut where there's nothing of value.

On a narrow rock ledge jutting out mid-mountain, a place where no one else would think of building a hut—that's where Shitou has built his abode. It is primarily where he lived and taught for 26 years, with no more than the minimum of things, without stuff of value and certainly the ledge was not on a plot of prized real estate. Although we know him today as the 8th Patriarch of Zen, he was not well known during his lifetime. Because of the location of his hut, Shitou referred to himself as a Rock Monk, rather than the more common description of independent monks like Shitou who were called Mountain Monks.



The small shack was a meditation hut, but also a residence, constructed midway up South Mountain in Hunan Province on the rock ledge pictured here. In the poem, Shitou talks about the conifers in the background, the overgrowth atop the rock and the grasses growing in the forefront of the rock ledge.

The hut was more a small shack than an impossibly tiny hut as implied in the LT translation. It can be understood to represent impermanence and simplicity, and the resultant life of ease for Shitou.

The grass thatch building material actualizes and acknowledges temporariness and change in an era when Emperors and renowned monks were constructing grand Temples, monasteries, palaces, and other edifices from materials meant to last for centuries. Some, in fact, are still around a thousand years after they were constructed, like the one on the mountaintop above the ledge on which Shitou had his shack. Shitou`s monastery is called South Peak Temple, and it is still in use today. We not only know the exact location of the monastery, but also of Shitou`s mountain ledge (pictured above).

Inside this hut, the poem says, lives a mountain monk, comfortable in a mindstate that arises from meditation, in a mindstate of peace that arises from the training of the mind *not* to seek out material stuff and make it seem “valuable.” In other words, not to seek “shiny stuff,” stuff we have added a false value to where none exists in and of itself. In the ML translation this is brought to clarity when it says there was nothing of value inside, whereas the LT translation seems to be interpreting the poem to suggest that it was the hut itself (or perhaps its location) that was of no value. The X translation suggests Shitou himself possessed nothing of value, just his robes. It seems to the authors of this commentary that any of those translations could be what Shitou meant, maybe all of them, for it is true that none of these things, the hut, its location, and its contents, has any intrinsic value.

The grass hut also might represent Shitou himself, and by extension—us, or any lay person. When we learn to be at ease in a world of impermanence and constant flux, joy arises from deep inside us in a new and stable way. We don`t need to be nuns or monks to do this. As Huineng, the Sixth Patriarch of Zen and briefly Shitou`s teacher, taught Shitou, we just need a diligent meditation practice and wisdom (the realization of emptiness).

Shitou has met this grass shack, in one interpretation, not only to live in, but also to remind us that we are meant to live in simplicity, without the aforementioned “shiny stuff” (ML). Shitou`s life, if it is to be a life of ease, involves simplicity, contentment with the barest requisites, and the need to be patient in the face of difficulty.

Shitou is a monk without a monastery. Free-lance monks were typical during this Tang/Song era in China. He is saying that all of us can, with diligence and determination, live simply and with ease. It is moments of pure awareness, of stable stillness, that arise in meditation to show us the value of simplicity—of living minimally and yet having everything we need. Simplicity, one observes, arises from living with impermanence as a friend, not a foe.

Impermanence is to live in a perpetual state of growth and decay. According to Carl (he`s 73 in 2021), as we age, we notice this more and more that there is always growth with decay—the newness of a torn rotator cuffs, falls result in hip replacements, arthritis that make our joints painful, etc. Ben Connelly notes jokingly in his commentary on this verse that his teacher said, “if our bodies weren`t falling apart, we`d be dead.” We are like the flimsiness and shoddiness of a thatched shack, open to the wilds of weather and weeds. It is our place to be intimate with the weeds—austere and intimate without fear, just there in comfort. It is a place of practice—where we recognize that practicing with the weeds is our practice.

Shitou is explaining that accepting impermanence means there`s no desire for more, for more stability based on external objects and surroundings, for more valuable stuff, for a more sturdy, substantive abode, for a better Self, and of course, for possessing more shiny things. This perspective is not unique to Shitou, **Impermanence**, in its deep philosophic sense, is a cornerstone of Buddhism. Elaborating, all physical and mental phenomena are in a constant process of conditioned construction and are interconnected, being dependently originated and arising. This indicates that the deeper meaning of impermanence is not about dissipation, about food decaying or our bodies aging or the hut falling into ruin, it is about the nature of phenomena being in a constant state of

construction and interdependence. This is Shitou`s understanding of impermanence. This is what he learned from his teacher Huineng. This is what he would like us to realize in our meditation.

Hard, solid, inflexible beliefs, beliefs and opinions and views that we reify so that they seem to be permanent, as we learn from thinking about the hut and our relationship to it, are the problem, not the solution to a better life—a life pursuing peace and attendant joy. Less isn`t more, it is enough.

As Sengcan says in his sixth century poem *Faith in Mind (Xinxinming)*, the great way is easy for those without preferences, for those who neither pick nor choose. And so it is with Shitou in his hut—a place where one relaxes and practices, without the embellishment of picking or choosing. Building this hut, and dealing with the weeds, whether in the grass thatching or in our heads, Shitou is implying that to be successful in practice, we need to walk gently.

He is also advocating, like his teacher Huineng, for a do-it-yourself Buddhism. Live simply, calmly, meditate by shining the light inward to realize emptiness. With a little help from our ancestral teachings, like those of Huineng`s *Platform Sutra* (or the more commonly known *Heart Sutra*, see deepdharma.org for a commentary), diligence in our practice, and not chasing after “shiny things,” that will lead us on our way to liberation.

Finally, the hut could be interpreted as being the Self, constructed out of our karma, with more valueless karma forming the walls and roof all the time.

Tags: “Simplicity” would certainly be a tag for this verse, “Impermanence” too, and there are several others possible. (See the recommendation on tagging at the end of the preface.)

After eating, I relax and enjoy a nap.

There are four lines in this verse, and on first read-through, this second line seems out of context with the other three, which are focused on the grass hut and its impermanence. However, coming so near the beginning as it does and surrounded by descriptions of the hut and its perpetual changes, the line emphasizes Shitou`s integration with the hut which is exemplary in its simplicity, and this in turn emphasizes the line`s message demonstrating how to live simply, without expectations.

How do we live simply? By just doing the next thing—we eat, we wash the bowl, we relax, and if we feel up for it, we take nap...nothing more, no seeking, no gaining. We live simply by just accepting transition into what comes next, without resistance, without objection to the impermanence and the uncertainty (LT). In the X translation, it is even simpler, just eat mindfully when it is appropriate. As anyone who has lived in a grass shack can tell you, daily sweeping and maintenance is a condition, but it doesn`t have to be a problem.

“Relax,” that`s an interesting idea, and not a common practice in the scriptural literature. It is not a synonym for meditation (meditation is an active function; relaxing is a passive function), though Shitou certainly has meditation in mind as a way for us to lessen our tension, anxiety, and stress from adding value where there is none, i.e., to enable us to relax when we aren`t meditating. Here he means exactly what it says, just relax.

Try it: just sit down in a comfortable chair and relax. Let your whole body relax, feel the weight on your body as it sinks into the chair. And then relax a little more, this time let it be more deeply than before. This isn`t meditating or watching your breath; it is just relaxing. People say they relax watching television or listening to music, but that`s not relaxing—not in the way Shitou means it, that`s watching television or listening to music. Those are “getting functions”, not “letting go functions.” Just relax can also be understood as just be gentle and mindful with yourself.

What`s next. Well—napping (LT). This is a more emptiness interpretation and a less emotional understanding—it`s more doing what is appropriate and less about enjoyment. It`s about abiding in conditions, being right here now in everyday life. Typical of Shitou`s teachings, he didn`t want us to seek out some complex philosophic teaching, but rather, as he suggests in this line, he leads us to realizing emptiness in the simple awareness of daily living! (MY)

Tags: “Mindfully abide in conditions,” “Relax,” ... Add your own additional tags here and going forward at the end of each line where it says “*Tags.*”

Practice Tip: Silent Illumination

Shitou practiced a meditation technique called “Silent Illumination.” Master Sheng-yen, one of the 20th century's most respected Chinese (Chan) monks, describes Silent Illumination in this way:

“When you first practice the Ch’an method of silent illumination, it is very simple. You just sit with the awareness that you are sitting. However, as your practice deepens, the method changes to where there is no method to speak of, even as you continue in the state of silent illumination. The silent aspect is achieved when wandering thoughts no longer trouble you. Illumination comes with being acutely aware of what is happening, even as your mind is silent. As your practice deepens you no longer need to remind yourself to stay on the method. You are just constantly in the state of silent illumination. In this sense, silent illumination becomes a method of no-method.”

Silent Illumination is frequently taught to begin with a body-scan relaxation process to help the practitioner attain a meditative state. Shitou’s injunction to relax in this first verse could be a reference to this process. After the body scan, the meditator pursuing Silent Illumination is to “just sit,” and not focus on dualistic objects like the breath or other meditative objects. Naturally, for many discursive thoughts may arise, and the meditator should just let those thoughts come and go without trying to avoid them or “dragging yourself back.” Approach the thoughts like the sound of a passing car – it is relatively easy to let the car sound come and go without attaching to it, it is just a sensation. Treat discursive thoughts the same way.

When it was completed, fresh weeds appeared.

When it was new and under construction, there were no weeds on the freshly tied thatching. MY: “The grass thatching still looks new.” Looks are deceptive, however. Underneath, even if not perceptible from the beginning, change is afoot in the hut, and while we were relaxing, meaning living the simple life, weeds have appeared where none were apparent when the thatching was first made. Yes, weeds appeared on the roof of the hut, certainly, but also in the occupant of the hut, be that Shitou or us writing this commentary, or you the reader. It is no different than us buying a new house today, everything seems perfect, then we begin to notice, as time passes, the need for roof repairs, leaks in the basement, etc. The seeds for these changes were always there, even if we did not apprehend them.

Tags:

Weeds

The weed is the perfect metaphor for the troublesome things that keep sprouting in our lives—so much diligence is needed to keep the hut and ourselves weed-free! Practicing with weeds is our practice, we are being told, and

there is nothing to be attained, there is no such state as “weed-free,” there is just practice, yielding and flowing with the changes in the thatching.

Just as we create our minds, we create the weeds. Weeds are, Shitou is saying, a normal part of how we create our everyday understanding of the conventional world. Thoughts, people, attractive material stuff, stuff which we cannot sit with without assigning it a value—desirable and wanted or undesirable and unwanted, that `s the stuff that covers our hut, our Self. Yes, our Self is a nasty weed we create with the delusion that it will somehow liberate us from suffering when in fact it fetters us to it.

It is well worth noting and considering that the word “weed” only appears in the LT Translation.

Tags:

Now it's been lived in - covered by weeds. (When it wears out, I`ll add fresh thatching to the roof. (MY))

Having lived in this hut for a while, where nothing is assigned value, we rest and meditate without embellishing. We meet the weeds with practice, “just so,” nothing more. No ascribing value, either positive or negative; just being there (here), *just so*. That`s what life in the hut is, that`s what Buddhism is: simple unfettered presence in the face of weeds. As the hut ages, like any house, the thatched roof will sprout weeds, cracks will appear from weather and general wear and tear, and conditions will tell Shitou when it is time for repairs and uprooting of the weeds.

Shitou is saying that to be able to live relaxed and at ease, we need only not assign an affinity or an aversion to our sense contacts. To live this way is referred to as “shutting the sense doors,” meaning having awareness, on the very barest level, and taking it no further. Shutting the sense doors is being present with the weeds without calling them “weeds” and getting stuck in valuing them as difficult and problematic. There is an implied understanding of the Five Aggregates here (see DeepDharma`s explanation of the Five Aggregates in the Heart Sutra commentary <http://www.deepdharma.org/our-commentaries/the-heart-sutra/>). Alternatively, we can follow Avalokiteshvara, protagonist of the *Heart Sutra*, and practice prajna paramita, meditating on emptiness.

Tags:

Verse Two

The person in the hut lives here calmly,

In this opening line of the second verse there is a shift from a first-person narrative to a third person narrative. It would seem Shitou is suggesting there is no first person, no Shitou-Self. When Shitou is in his abode, he is just there – simply and utterly present, without a Self. In fact, he is always present and yet not present, being liberated, as explained in the next line of this verse. But, if the “person” isn`t Shitou, it might be that the poem is suggesting it is one of us—Andy or Carl, who authored this commentary, or maybe you the reader. Note also that MY presents the occupant as “present,” which seems to track with LT`s use of “calmly” – present = calmly.

Why the shift? Perhaps because when written in the 1st person, the poem is an invitation to share the point of view of the author. Here the reader is expected to be different. There is a deemphasizing of the I, a fundamental theme of the poem. (We will see in Verse Five the idea of making Self smaller.) The person who lives in this hut now is merely nominally Shitou, who has let go of “I, Me, My, Mine.” This is crucial to understand as suffering largely arises from a belief in a reified world view that is I-Me-My-Mine centered. We have become the resident, and the hindrance to a path of calm is plainly all around us, right over our heads, in the form of our attachment to the weeds that have grown in the grass roof, from our Self.

This first line of the verse is implying that we consider the difference between Shitou and us, between one who has realized No Self and one who has not, between one who lives without embellishments in a hut covered in weeds, without adding false values to shiny desirable and undesirable stuff, and one who is still attached to weeds and lives a life of suffering.

How do we consider No Self? Classically it is through intellectual scrutiny of the Five Aggregates. As the Five Aggregates is the model for how we create our Self, if we can examine it closely enough to recognize that each of the five aggregates is empty, then a Self which is a collection of the five must be empty as well. Hence, No Self. (*More about No Self can be found at DeepDharma.org: <http://www.deepdharma.org/no-self/>*)

Think of a world where you weren't the center of the universe, where you were egoless. Consider a universe where you were present without a need for it to be other than exactly what it is. Realize, if you can, during meditation, that it is possible to "just be," without any expectations or ego-needs (weeds). Then you will have taken a long stride toward Shitou-ism, toward No Self, toward Not Self, toward Not-of-Self. That would be a life that is calm, present in the hut, without adding values *where there is nothing of value*.

Tags:

Not stuck to inside, outside, or in between.

Shitou is telling us, in the LT translation, that we shouldn't get stuck "inside." By inside we can surmise he means meditation, and perhaps Shitou is also suggesting we not get attached to our karma, or this can be seen as an exhortation to use meditation to focus on no-self by shutting the sense doors, not to improperly use our time meditating to indulge in worldly contemplation that amounts to obsession, producing karma.

By "outside," he means not to get stuck in our conventional stories about the outside world. Also, do not allow reification of conventional stories to develop into rumination and obsessive thinking.

By "in between" he is saying not to attach to emptiness, or said another way, not to attach to The Middle Way. The Middle Way is just a raft; a teaching to move us along the path to liberation, it is not a belief or view to which we should attach. MY doesn't mention "in between" or the Middle Way, whereas X/M interprets the poem to say that we should note there is no difference between inside, middle, and outside. The latter seems most consistent with this commentary's authors interpretation, there is unified ultimate reality and all stories and conventional truths converge there – no distinct phenomena, only dependent arising.

Regardless of which interpretation that resonates most with us, the question is 'How do we do this?' How do we not attach to inside, outside, or in between? Being mindful is one way not to get stuck here. Shutting our sense doors (see above) is another skillful means for allowing us to be here without being stuck. Realizing No Self through contemplative meditation is also a practice to stop our tendency toward stuckedness. And as Shitou explains, we are not stuck when we are calm, when we are relaxed, when we are not resisting the weeds or allowing them to infect our practice.

Ultimately, we can see during meditation, when we shine a light inward, that there is no inside/outside (that would be dualistic, not good); they, along with in-between, are empty—so there's nothing to stick to, to get stuck on, not even emptiness itself, which is empty. Emptiness being an adjective, not a noun.

When we say everything is empty, the question arises, empty of what. For Shitou, here in his hut, the answer is "empty of value." Empty of "value," Carl and Andy assert, means empty of any permanent, inherent definition, quality, form, function, or, as Shitou says in the very first line of this poem—empty of an inherent value, not

worth cherishing. For Shitou, emptiness, be it inside, outside, or in the middle, is the ultimate nature of all phenomena, and there is nothing there to grasp. Shitou repeats his theme of non-grasping/non-attainment.

Shitou is profoundly practiced, like Avalokiteshvara in the Heart Sutra (<http://www.deepdharma.org/our-commentaries/the-heart-sutra>) as we see from his instructions to us on how to develop new understandings of practice that lead us to more and more ease. [Note that the Sanskrit word for suffering is *dukkha*, and the word for ease, its antonym, is *sukkha*. “Ease” is the opposite of suffering.]

Shitou is telling us that his path to liberation, to a life of ease, involves mindfulness, meditation, and intellectual scrutiny, which is another way of looking inside that we call contemplative meditation (contrasted with rumination or obsession.) Further, he is suggesting that this can be done in daily life.

Ben Connelly, in his commentary of this verse, interprets Shitou`s Path as a path to living an ethical life based on the Noble Eightfold Path. Connelly sees inside as comprised of right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration. He sees outside as comprised of right speech, right action, and right livelihood. While it is an interesting interpretation, and certainly raises some important ideas about fundamental Buddhist practice having a moral bent, being at its core a moral practice, it ignores Shitou`s great emphasis of deluded valuations and emptiness which arise from the wisdom of emptiness. And it only covers six of the eight folds!

It might be easier just to consider that with No Self, there is no Shitou and no “I,” period.

Tags:

Places worldly people live, he doesn't live.

Shitou is absolutely clear that the resident of this hut does not hang out in the everyday world (MY) where seeking more is the chief value and way of valuing. It seems that nothing much has changed between how people acted in 8th century China and how we act today in our competitive, driven to always wanting, and an often morally blind view of the world. Clearly, Shitou sees himself as the person who is no longer a worldly person.

Anyway, the resident has left the everyday world, as perceived by the unpracticed, to live a life here now, that is *just so* rather than always seeking, always needing, always wanting, always ill-at-ease. And the resident has done that with a diligent effort as Shitou has outlined above—mindfulness, meditation, moral rectitude, and realizing emptiness. The hut is not a place, in the sense of a location, rather here we see it is a mindstate whose chief characteristics are patience, compassion, and generosity.

With practice, this liberated mindstate is available to all of us. We just need to turn ourselves toward introspection, self-examination, and meditative self-reflection. If we use intellectual scrutiny instead of continuing to embed ourselves in the false values of our everyday lives as imagined from our more primitive mental reflexes, then greed, anger, and delusion will lessen and fall away.

Tags:

Realms worldly people love, he doesn't love.

Shitou makes it clear, following up on the previous line, that he doesn`t like, more emphatically doesn`t *love*, the things that attract the unpracticed and unliberated—attainment instead of calmness, for example. What

Shitou doesn't love shiny stuff, weeds. For Shitou, love is an attachment to shiny stuff, and as such it is not a place he lets his mind go, as worldly people do.

When Shitou writes about love, it isn't romantic love, nor is it devotional love, nor spiritual nor altruistic love, nor any of the many other types of love—nor even agape, which is the form of universal love adopted by Christianity from the Greeks. This is love as the emotion that *attaches* us to worldly desires—this is the worst kind of love, it is more like obsession!

When we look at the first two verses in the LT and MY translations, we could see a sense of ownership and arrogance in the way Shitou is presented. Our take is that Shitou is simply being descriptive. He sees the world differently than the unenlightened, and that may seem arrogant and strange, but it is not meant to be. Just so for the profoundly practiced is different than for the novice, dramatically different.

Finally, if we take seriously Shitou's observation that the monk doesn't love (isn't attached to) realms worldly people love, this can be seen as a notice that we may need to grapple with the lessening of attachment to worldly realms occasioned by a deepening practice. As our attachment and attraction to things of conventional interest (e.g., our collection of fine wines, baseball cards, our career awards, or our hobbies) lessen, it can be disorienting—some of these attachments form the basis of friendships and other relationships. At a deeper level, however, this progression means we are engaging less with delusion and suffering, allowing us to form relationships based more on compassion than karma-accumulating small talk or worldly interests.

Tags:

Verse Three

Though the hut is small, it includes the entire world.

We are connected to everything; from the perspective of emptiness, everything is interrelated and interdependent; small and big no difference. Similar to inside, outside, and in-between, no difference. This non-differentiation is being developed as a theme. That's how Shitou wants us to understand this line which opens the third verse. This is no easy concept to grasp—not that we should be grasping!

The analogy of Indra's net may be helpful in understanding this:

INDRA'S NET

In the heavenly abode of the great god Indra, there is a wonderful net that has been hung so that it stretches out indefinitely in all directions. In accordance with the extravagant tastes of deities, there is a single glittering jewel at the net's every node, and since the net itself is infinite in dimension, the jewels are infinite in number. There hang the jewels, glittering like stars of the first magnitude, a wonder to behold.

If we now arbitrarily select one of these jewels and look closely at it, we will see that on its polished surface there are reflected all the other jewels in the net, infinite in number. Not only that, but each of the jewels reflected in this one jewel is also reflecting all the other jewels, so that the process of reflection is infinite.

Understanding Indra's Net

1. The Interconnectedness of All Things

When any jewel in the net is touched, all other jewels in the node are affected. This speaks to the hidden interconnectedness and interdependency of everything and everyone in the universe, and has an indirect reference to the concept of "Dependent Origination" in Buddhism.

2. Lack of a substantive self

Each node, if considered as representing an individual, simply reflects the qualities of all other nodes, implying the notion of 'not-self' or a lack of a solid and permanent self.

3. Non-locality

Indra's Net shoots holes in the assumption of a solid and fixed universe out there. The fact that all nodes are simply reflections indicates that there is no particular single source point from where it all arises. This addresses some of the key issues of the meaning of life (see *Life Is Meaningful* in the introduction here:

<http://www.deepdharma.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/Nagarjuna-Middle-Way-Philosophy-MMK.pdf>).

4. Illusion or Mara

The fact that all nodes are simply a reflection of all others implies the illusory nature of all appearances. Appearances are thus not reality but an illusion of reality.

5. The Mirror-like Nature of Mind

The capacity to reflect all things attests to the mind being like a mirror of reality, not its basis.

Tags:

In ten square feet, an old man illumines forms and their nature.

This line tightly follows the line above it, emphasizing that one doesn't need anything to have everything; it is simply a matter of allowing things to be as they are, in The Middle Way: interrelated and interdependent and always in flux. When we realize this, we are able to be with things as they are so deeply that even a small shack on a rock ledge is enough for a practitioner to realize forms, meaning materialities and Self, and their true nature: dependently arisen and empty.

It doesn't matter how big the hut was. In LT the dimensions (ten square feet), which on first read seems to be about the hut, really is about Shitou's meditation cushion. Again, what matters is our practice, as Shitou keeps reminding us—not whether the hut is ten square feet or ten feet by ten feet. It is the quality of one's practice, as Carl learned when he resided in a monastery, not the location or size of the facility, or for that matter, not the rituals and rites either. The quality of one's commitment and practice, that's what it is all about. Sitting on the cushion to realize No Self, that's what it is all about. It is not about where we are, it is about how we are there. It is about being here, just so, as Shitou says.

Tags:

A Great Vehicle bodhisattva trusts without doubt.

A Great Vehicle Bodhisattva was originally an archetype for a fully enlightened being in the Mahayana tradition. It was the term that indicated the person was a Buddha. A capital “B” Bodhisattva came to be seen as a deity, and with passing centuries, the status was lowered to a lowercase “b” bodhisattva, meaning anyone who is seeking liberation by following the Buddhist path. All practitioners today, therefore, are bodhisattvas. The term itself is one of respect, regardless of where one practices and where one’s practice is at this moment.

So we practitioners, we bodhisattvas, who practice toward emptiness (the great vehicle) “trust without doubt.” What do we trust? Shitou is saying that we trust, without any doubt, the ideas Shitou is propounding. Do you trust in Shitou’s teachings? Carl emphatically does. Andy too, if a little less emphatically (or maybe just without the benefit of Carl’s longer and deeper practice.)

Back to doubts. Buddhist scriptures are laden with lists, and doubt appears on three of the six key lists of problematic behaviors: it is one of the ten fetters, one of the five hindrances, and one of the ten armies of Mara. Only one other behavior, sensory desire, appears on more lists, so doubt is a serious problem for bodhisattvas. Resting or relaxing without doubt is the point from which faith arises in Buddhism.

Having a lack of doubt by such an august group is a big deal affirmation for Shitou’s style of practice—straightforward and simple. Other Bodhisattvas, we are being told (ML) would have no doubts about what Shitou believes. They would understand it directly—one enlightened mind to another, is what is being implied here. Interestingly, this is the only explicit appeal to authority included in *Grass Hut*, a departure stylistically from the rest of the poem which relies on descriptive language and analogy.

Overcoming doubt, overcoming wavering in one’s understanding of one’s practice, is a key training for a bodhisattva. In fact, one could argue that Shitou is saying that to be a bodhisattva (either with a capital or lowercase “b”), one must have faith in the practice. With this faith, doubt just falls away. We find this identical teaching in the Heart Sutra (see DeepDharma.org, commentaries)

Simply put, doubt is a mindstate that leads us away from the Path and toward unwholesome behaviors and negative mindstates. Doubt can overtake our minds, causing us to stray, and can overtake us in meditation, leading to grasping, clinging, and attaching during our time on the cushion. Doubt, like greed, anger, and delusion is a very deeply rooted weed that needs uprooting.

“Trust without doubt.” That’s a mouthful and a mindful. Being here, just here, being just so with whatever arises, that is having a strong enough faith to eliminate doubt. But it is not easy, not even for the most well practiced of bodhisattvas.

Without doubt existing (as one of the grittiest and most incendiary of hindrances, as The Heart Sutra says), no fears exist. When no fears exist, one settles into bodhisattvahood with a relaxed mind and body that are at ease with the uncertainty of impermanence. That’s what Shitou did! It is what he is so clearly telling us to do.

Tags:

The middling or lowly can't help wondering; [All humans may think them strange (MY)]; [but a middle or lower bodhisattva hears something strange (X)]

Unfortunately, many Buddhist scriptures composed and used, from ancient times to modern times, the categorization of practitioners by their perceived intelligence. These categories were meant to indicate how to -

intellect, several lifetimes for those of “middling” intelligence, and many many lifetimes for the lowly who were seen as dullards virtually incapable of moving forward along the path. It is a nonsensical, wholly indefensible categorization. By today`s standards, it is shameful. Further, there are also scriptures that clearly state that there is no correlation between intelligence and one`s likelihood of becoming enlightened, like Dogen`s *Fukanzazengi*, the *Universally Recommended Instructions for Zazen*.

In this poem, by contrast, it seems Shitou is saying that a cap B Bodhisattva believes without doubt, while lowercase bodhisattvas don`t hear his teachings clearly, teachings which seem strange. Indeed, on first hearing and learning about emptiness, it certainly seems strange: nothing is the way it appears, nothing is there as we are perceiving it, nothing is both there and not there. That is indeed strange.

But there is an argument to be made that this interpretation is not what Shitou meant. We suggest that a deeper reading is that this is a descriptive ranking of one`s practice (well-practiced, regularly practicing, and a novice practice, respectively). So it is about the depth of one`s practice, not one`s IQ. This appears to be supported by reviewing the MY and X translations of this line (see above).

Regardless of one`s status, one`s depth of practice, we can explore this verse by wondering who has this doubt. Middling and Lowly bodhisattvas (“humans” in MY), people who are practicing but have not reached a realization of emptiness, Shitou is saying. They still have doubts; they are still wondering. And wondering what? Well, we pretty much wonder and worry about everything. Hindering us, this wondering is our tendency to judge and value, painfully and chronically, the worth and importance of everything with which we make a sense contact. What do we wonder? We just wonder. Always wonder. We are curious and filled with doubt, says Shitou, until we reach a realization of No Self. Perhaps we wonder because it is impermanent; perhaps because we aren`t able to relax,. Shitou seems to be deliberately ambiguous here, in the spirit of this wondering.

The big question we may be wondering about is stated clearly in the next line of this verse: Will this hut perish or not?

Tags:

Will this hut perish or not? (Ask this temple whether it is bad or not (X))

Certainly the hut will perish; no question about that, no doubt about that. The nature of the hut is to be impermanent and to decay with time, both from just aging and also from the weeds that grow up and around the shack. Interestingly, this raises the question: does decaying require growth. That aside, a more significant question arises here. Shitou is asking us if we will “perish or not?” Is our nature the same as the hut: impermanent and perishing?

The easy and obvious answer is, of course, we are impermanent, of course we are becoming decrepit from sickness and old age, of course we are perishing. Our Self, which we have constructed from our karmic propensities, from our narratives that delude us into thinking we are permanent, are ever leading us to believe in our materiality as unending. The karmic desire for material and immaterial existence leads us to create narratives which give the illusion of a permanent Self, of an unperishing hut.

This shell called “I,” this Self I believe is here, really here as I perceive it, Me—is my hut. That is the shift Shitou is making in this verse. He is making it clear that He is and We are the hut. The hut is a metaphor, and just as the hut will decay and perish, so will all of us. But the existential question still looms in our consciousness: Will we perish?

Ultimately speaking, there is no Self to perish, as Shitou tells us. But conventionally, of course, we will perish. Understanding this is a big step toward liberation. It is an idea that takes years of practice to realize. And the goal isn't to attain it, but to allow it to arise from our mindfulness and meditation.

Shitou is teaching us about our impermanence and our relationship to ultimate reality, emptiness. Of course we exist, but just conventionally, and of course we will perish, but again, just conventionally. What unfetters us from that series of deluded thoughts about who we are and that we *are* here, is realizing that we have constructed our own little grass-thatched roofed-hut from suffering-sourced thinking.

It's time, Shitou is also saying, for us to realize that we are impermanent. To realize we are a grass hut. To learn to *just be* the hut, imperfect and weed-laden as it is, and to seek nothing, to end our suffering-sourced deluded thoughts about how we exist and don't exist at the same time. Or, in terms of the X translation, not to be a "bad hut."

Tags:

Verse Four

Perishable or not, the original master is present,

Shitou wants us to know, whether we perceive ourselves as perishable or not, that we are impermanent and perishable. Further, what we learn from sitting with impermanence is that what lies under our conventional everyday stories about Self and Other, is emptiness. Emptiness is the original master ("one mind" (X)), the "main element" or ultimate nature, and it is there, right here, regardless of conventional conditions, it is, right where we are. Our original master is always present, freely available to anyone who chooses to see the world without the fox of greed, anger and delusion, and ultimately through the realization of emptiness through personal experience.

The ability to become enlightened, Shitou says, is always here, always present, always where we are. Question is, are you present, are you here now, no more, no less, no other place? Are you here, just aware, without relying on words or conventions or concepts? The "original master" isn't Shitou, it is our ultimate nature.

Tags:

not dwelling south or north, east or west

In this line of Verse Four, Shitou is challenging us to understand the Middle Way, the way things arise when there is no permanence and no cause and effect when there are no inherent characteristics in things existing "from their own side" to attach attraction or aversion to. It is an awareness that is beyond words and conventions and concepts. All phenomena contain (or do not contain) north, south, east, west, and all of these designations together do not begin to describe the nature of ultimate reality. He does this using direction as the metaphor. But all the great Chan and Zen Buddhist philosophers have addressed this issue, using slightly different pairs of words to drive home that we can get past subject/object duality, beyond words.

Anytime there is subject/object duality, there is emptiness arising from the Middle Way. Specifically, in this verse, Shitou is telling us that we don't inhabit a location, a particular locale in space, and he seems to be implying that this applies to time as well, or a particular moment of time.

Being in a specific place in time and space is simply not possible. Why? Because they exist conventionally, not permanently. It's laughable when you look closely at it: stand at the bottom of the planet on the South Pole and there is no South; walk east on the equator for long enough and you will find yourself walking west heading back to your point of origin.

Granted that the original master is always present, then locales (south, north, east, and west) and time (past, present, and future) in which we do things must be impermanent, meaning empty of characteristics existing in nature, always arising and simultaneously perishing.

Looking at time, which is implied here, there cannot be a permanently valued past, present, and future because if that were permanent then they could exist without any relationship to each other and, ludicrously, the future could occur before the past. Your car could appear in the garage before you drove it in there, or dinner could appear on the table before it was cooked.

Time and space, and any dualism, has to be seen, for Shitou, as explained here, as a set of relations between things, all of which depend on each other (there cannot be a future without a present and past, for example) and so time and all the other examples are dependently originated, falsely valued and empty. Again, this makes the point that when we are on the Path we are not adding false valuations to stuff.

Shitou is telling us to live in a place where there is no valuating, where the shiny stuff no longer exists. This is because it has perished with the realization of impermanence and non-duality.

Tags:

Firmly based on steadiness, it can't be surpassed.

Simply put, a solid foundation is what counts (MY), as we are told. Consistent, steady, diligent effort is at the heart of a practice. A practice unwavering in purpose and totally reliable, steadiness is a gate to freedom in face of the inconstancy and impermanence and the confusing false values added to things because of our erroneous views. Here Shitou is saying that a sincere practice is a commitment to a regular, consistent meditation practice. Without a strong meditation practice, we will lack the calmness of mind necessary to realize there is nothing of value: not Shitou, not the hut, and not one's Self. That is the gate to a relaxed life, a life of calm, a life of ease that arises from wisdom, a life so filled with peacefulness that it is unsurpassable.

Tags:

A shining window below the green pines

We offer two ways to interpret this image, of the window visible beneath the pines:

First, Shitou is suggesting that whether it is rafting down the Colorado, powerful and majestic, awe-inspiring on an unsurpassable scale, or walking around the Jefferson Memorial when the cherry blossoms are in full bloom, what we see makes us aware of our smallness. Feeling awe and wonder results from having a little window through which we have moments of access to emptiness. We notice how small we are and are reminded that we should always be the smallest person in the room, the smallest person is the one that listens without adding imaginary value to their beliefs and opinions over the others in the room.

We have a little window in our hut, Shitou is saying, through which shines the awe-inspiring vastness of nature, of ultimate nature, which is represented by the pines that overhang his hut, but is everywhere. Anyone who has just relax, relaxed in a conifer garden or forest preserve understands this, Shitou illustrates.

A second interpretation sees the window shining beneath the pines as the ever-presence of ultimate hope and wisdom. The hut is obscure, not well-known and of no duration or value. It is dwarfed by its surroundings and under threat of disappearing from view behind the encroaching tree growth and other vegetation. Nevertheless, the window is always there, eminently visible *if you look for it*. The window is the dharma, able to be observed present through focus, even though it is subsumed for many beneath the noise and confusion of the world as perceived through the veil of delusion and ignorance. Without focus, greed, anger and delusion will throw up manifold distractions, overhanging the clear window of the dharma the way that the pines overhang the roof of the hut. Shitou reminds us that we can pierce the green thicket, and apprehend the clarity of ultimate reality, if we determine to do so.

Tags:

Jade palaces or vermilion towers can't compare with it.

Neither grand palaces and monasteries built to last for centuries, Temples colored with the bright Chinese red, representing longevity, happiness, beauty, vitality, success and good fortune, nor today`s giant skyscrapers in urban downtowns, stone and brick houses that rise from city streets like fortresses, none of these, Shitou says, can compare with a nap after lunch in a simple abode or a mindful meditative sit in nature.

Again, these jade palaces and bright red pagodas are weeds, unlike the conifers and a simple abode, which are peacefulness when we are with them, with them *just so*. Indeed, just so means that none of these grand edifices are the result of right view or right action.

On an everyday level, as one progresses with practice, these edifices, and indeed other things in life that conventional wisdom hold out as impressive and valuable become less attractive – they are revealed as having no inherent interest, they are empty. They once seemed valuable or impressive because of false and arbitrary value lent to them through delusion, and this support for our former attraction and attachment lessen their hold on our minds as we recognize delusion.

This process can yield surprising challenges as practice deepens. For example, Andy has been a musician for almost 40 years, and at points pursued music as an obsession and profession. As he has pursued the dharma, even at his novitiate level, the hold music has had for so long on his attention and emotional outlook has lessened (along with that of many other things). When this began to happen, it was quite a disturbance, and Andy realized that his attachment to music itself was a hindrance and expression of karma that could be counterproductive and upsetting. This is not to say that Andy has discarded music entirely – only that he has recognized that it is possible to have a delusion-enhancing relationship with it. When viewed through the lens of the dharma (looking in through the window of the grass hut), music and other “edifices” can be seen for what they are – the product of narratives imputing value. With this view, it is still possible to engage with music, but with an eye toward mitigating the most delusion-enhancing parts of this engagement – you can control what you think and feel about the music rather than being controlled by it.

Tags:

Verse Five

Just sitting with head covered, all things are at rest. (With a monk`s robe over my shoulders and a hood over my head, I`ve got no worries at all. (MY))

Just having a grass hut to sit in, a grass roof over our heads, Shitou tells us in this verse, is all we need to practice, and to be relaxed, calm and at ease. Shitou, who seems to have become the narrator again, is saying that we need very little to be comfortable in our lives, very little more to clothe ourselves than a simple monk`s robe. All he really needs is just a monk`s robe to cover his body with a hood to cover his head and keep him comfortable and warm. No special rooms in our house for meditation, no special outfits for sitting—no fancy yoga apparel for this monk!

He is asserting that a condo in a Mies van der Rohe tower of steel and glass isn`t needed; it is just a big weed. In fact, we need very little by way of externals to be at peace. Put differently, simplicity and ease are not about accumulating stuff—stuff is, after all, just weeds. Simplicity and ease in our practice is not about bigger buildings built by famous architects, it is about living with just enough, just a hooded robe will do. With just that we are worry-free. Aptly put another way in a classic rap hit by Notorious B.I.G. (RIP),”Mo Money, Mo Problems.”

When Carl asks students in his classes if they have a place of refuge, a place they can go (be it internal or external) for refuge, he gets mostly blank stares. Shitou is teaching us that refuge is all around us, if we don`t go chasing after shiny stuff.

Tags:

Thus, this mountain monk doesn't understand at all.

First, we should know from this line that Shitou, this mountain monk, “doesn`t understand,” definitely doesn`t mean he is ignorant of the texts and scriptural teachings, or that he is lowly-minded, barely practiced. What he (and we) don`t know, we are being told, is anything with certainty.

Being just so, as Shitou has been teaching in this poem, is being here in the midst of the weeds and impermanence without resistance—relaxed and calm in the face of “only not knowing,” as the Korean Zen Master Seung Sahn always said.

Being here, just so, *without* any preconceived ideas or notions, definitions or expectations that are attempting to make things substantive and certain, that is what Shitou is advocating. Ultimately, there is nothing to understand!

How can one really engage in the attempt at not knowing when to apprehend that all notions, even all perceptions, are not representations of any objective reality, when all our karma pushes us in the opposite direction? How can we expect to be just here in the midst of impermanence, after all, without steady study and focus, without what Nagarjuna called “intellectual scrutiny”?

We need to know and not know simultaneously! Be ignorant and not ignorant at the same time. We need to hunker down and contemplate what we are being taught here. Shitou isn`t bragging that he can realize emptiness, rather he is suggesting that we can all lessen our suffering by focusing on not reifying who and what we are. Just question everything that arises, Shitou is suggesting, until awareness arises that there is nothing arising. Discover that our greatest hindrance is our discomfort with not knowing, and that without this hindrance, no fear exists. Wow. A life without fear—awesome.

Tags:

Living here he no longer works to get free.

Shitou realizes that wherever we are, that is where we are and where we should be practicing. Wherever we are right now, that is our abode, let it be simple. Weeds or no weeds, we can just relax into being here. There is nothing to attain, nothing needed or missing, everything is at ease as long as we no longer seek more, but rather just settle into here, now, as it is. Shitou is also reminding us we are not salespersons, pushing a product called “dharma,” or “Buddhism,” or “liberation.”

Mountain monk, forest monk, city monk, or “rock monk” as Shitou preferred to call himself, no difference. Just be and you`re free...of weeds and needs. This is the no-gaining idea of Zen, the non-attaining attainment. This is calm and ease, in and of itself, that comes from not trying to get free.

Tags:

Who would proudly arrange seats, trying to entice guests?

Shitou is using “arranging seats,” to mean the displaying of one`s wealth and status as a monk through possessing exquisitely constructed temples and astonishing brocaded silk robes, to entice guests. This is all wrong, for Shitou, who has repeatedly taught simplicity as enough. In fact, more than enough. The expensive trappings are weeds, big deep-rooted weeds, weeds that hinder and fetter rather than free us to practice, rather than free us to sit in stillness and meditate. Stop shopping!

Pride in a bigger house or grander Temple aren`t enticing to Shitou. They aren`t enticing for they are just weeds that make our ego bigger, fill our practice and our Self with false value where there is none. False value here in the negative, meaning arrogance and pride and similar mindstates that puff one up at possessing grand seats or elevated thrones.

Expensive seats are disruptive to a simple life. They are not useful rafts to liberation. Being modest and humble, those are the seats of Shitou`s practice, the furniture of his hut. He is suggesting we not be enticed by golden dragon armed chairs with delicately embroidered silk cushions, rather we stay in calmness and make whatever place we are in a place where there is nothing of value.

Tags:

Verse Six

Turn around the light to shine within, then just return. (Its just that when the twilight comes, My mind is limitless from front to back. (MY))

Shine the light within; see how you are covering yourself with weeds; notice how your mind creates weeds, with imaginary disturbances. Notice the impermanence of your thoughts; notice the not-self nature of the weeds and mental obstructions; notice your own Not-Self or Not-Self nature. Just return to your place of refuge: simplicity, impermanence, No-Self, emptiness. Then just return to being here, now, wherever you are you can be in a grass hut. Allow the hut to be a place of refuge. Allow the hut to be your teacher and to show you how there is refuge in the teachings and the sangha, the communities of ordained nuns and monks.

Comparing the two translations above suggests that Shitou`s original writing uses a holistic perspective on how we interact with the light of the dharma. The LT translation uses an active voice, having Shitou direct us to shine the light within, working with it to reveal the truth of no-self. The MY translation allows the light to work upon us, when it comes it will cause limitlessness in our minds, free of perceptions of false duality. No-self, no separation and therefore no limits, for a limit would require there to be an “over here” and an “over there.”

Back to our weed analogy, let the grass hut be a place when, during meditation, you see how meditation releases us from struggles with the weeds. In meditation, especially vipassana, shikantaza, and mindfulness of mind-style meditations, we look inside for insight into letting go of unwholesome stories and emotions. This is how we cleanup the hut and uproot the karmic weeds that are causing us suffering.

We shine the light within when we sit in stillness and just allow ourselves to rest in calm with whatever is. Especially at twilight (MY), when eternalists seem to be coming and going, we need to remember to look inside ourselves to shine the light on No Self.

Tags:

The vast inconceivable source can't be faced or turned away from.

When we sit in stillness, just so, with what is, we become one with the inconceivable source (emptiness); there is no turning away, it is Us. We are no longer observers, we are the original source, the purely aware non-conceptual, non-linguistic presence. This cannot be established or denied. It can`t be faced or turned away from because, as Shitou explained in Verse Four, there is no facing and nothing to face, nothing to turn from and no turning away. There is just a mere awareness, pure and unriddled by our karma. Pure and unriddled because it is impermanent and beyond words and thoughts, vast and open, beyond conceptualizations, way beyond distinctiveness. Again, we are not separate from it, we are it—although there is no Us and no It in the vastness of emptiness.

Tags:

Meet the ancestral teachers, be familiar with their instruction,

Shitou`s very clear and emphatic teaching is in this line. Learn from the ancient scriptures, meaning learn from the writings of our ancestral teachers—the renowned, and sometimes enlightened, nuns and monks who have written and preserved our heritage. While Shitou (and Carl and Andy) continually emphasize the beyond-rational, non-dual and transcendent-of-description nature of ultimate reality (emptiness), we recognize that steps along the path must be taught in ways that are comprehensible as conventional narratives. This is the essential logic of the Two Truths as taught by Nagarjuna and other sages – apprehension of emptiness can only be worked toward through conventional narratives.

Shitou was a disciple of Huineng, the sixth patriarch of Chan/Zen, and the author of one of the most important Chan scriptures: *The Platform Sutra*. So, not only was Shitou telling us how he learned, but also that we should learn from him. Shitou was to become the eighth patriarch, and his teachings abound in the scriptures and biographies of Chan texts from this period—late Tang and early Song Dynasties (8th century CE).

We can use today`s sangha leaders and teachers to learn the teachings of the ancients and how the teachings can be used as rafts to float our boats (our grass huts?) to freedom from suffering, or at least to lead us to a little more peacefulness and calm each day through steady practice.

Shitou is not only suggesting we study from our ancestral teachers, but that we learn to follow our current teachers, who if carefully chosen, will model simplicity and lead one to building and living where there is nothing of value.

Tags:

Bind grasses to build a hut, and don't give up.

Shitou wants us to be certain when he told us to be steady and diligent in our practice that we don't give up, that we won't back away when effort is required. For most practitioners, there are times when it is simply difficult to hold steadfast and to have faith that if we do, we will get past the troublesome moments we are experiencing. When this happens, we can shift our focus to different teachings or teachers, different modes of meditation. As the poem says, bind grasses, no single sheaf or blade of teaching will work forever to keep the hut intact.

Faith is an essential quality needed if we are to keep doing it, keep practicing, whether it is sitting meditation or studying and contemplating ancient texts. Faith is what Shitou believes keeps him constant in his practice, what keeps him from giving up when faced with “perceived injustices,” as Bodhidharma called weeds. Faith is what allows him not to get stuck in the entanglements of falsely valued social conventions.

To be clear, when we use the term “Faith,” we do not mean blind belief in anything, natural or supernatural. Instead, Faith is one of the “roots of virtue” according to Vasubandhu, and may be thought of as conviction that staying on the path will lessen delusion. See the following excerpt from *DeepDharma.org*'s commentary on Vasubandhu's “51 Mental Factors Most Relevant to Spiritual Practice” from the *Abhidharmakosha*.
<http://www.deepdharma.org/51-mental-factors-from-vasubandhus-abhidharmakosha/> :

Faith / confidence / respectful belief – gives us positive attitude to virtue and objects that are worthy of respect. Whether blind or not, all types of faith are, at least to some degree, useful and wholesome. Three types are distinguished, with the last one being the preferred type (the first being least preferred, the second being somewhat OK):

1. Uncritical faith: motivation is for no apparent reason – this is the “just believe it” type of blind faith that the Buddha decried but which institutional Buddhism often advocates
2. Longing faith: motivation that is by an emotionally unstable mind – this is a not-firmly-reasoned, intermittent belief that is fundamentally unfounded though periodically desired veneration; it is a temporary fidelity based on a desire at the moment
3. Conviction: motivated by sound reasons – this is faith that arises, not blindly, but from reason and experience; it leads to liberation.

Tags:

Verse Seven

Let go of hundreds of years and relax completely.

This is a simple sounding observation by Shitou— “let go” of old problematic thinking and, as always with Shitou: just relax, relax completely. The hundreds of years of struggles and difficulties is our karma. No poem, and certainly not this one by Shitou, would be complete without emphasizing our need to deal with our karma, to deal with letting go of our karmic constraints.

Karma is the motivational dispositions, the imprints, stored in our mind which, when conditions warrant it, volitionally assemble into narratives that suggest how we should act—they are memory fragments that arise and create stories which will motivate us to act with body, speech, and mind. Without karma, we would be unable to function in the world; we wouldn't know how to act; in fact, there wouldn't even be a world.

These are the hundreds, thousands and thousands of years of accumulated tendencies and difficulties that make up our personalities. These are the narratives that Shitou is telling us to let go. Not easy, not at all easy.

These weigh heavily on us—whether in the form of a biological imperative to survive or a current anxiety over a project at work, or a more serious condition, like post-traumatic stress from watching your buddy blown to bits by an IED, or an event that occurred a century ago in the family that still haunts us. These are the narratives that Shitou is telling us to let go. Even with training from a well-practiced teacher, not at all easy.

(Extensive notes on karma can be found at DeepDharma: <http://www.deepdharma.org/beliefs-and-practices/karma/>).

Tags:

Open your hands and walk, innocent.

This line follows up on the previous line's "relax completely." Open hands indicate a welcoming, non-threatening posture. Here Shitou is suggesting again that we "let go" (show open hands) of the past karmic drivers imprinted on our psyche and walk, move through our lives, with the innocence of a child, with a pure awareness. Open-handedness, Shitou is saying, leads to wholesome mindstates and behaviors, to karmic predispositions that result in us becoming a little more peaceful with each deed, whether of body, speech, or mind. Open-handedness is a non-harming posture, it is the posture that we maintain in "the giving of no fear," a form of generosity unique to Buddhism. As noted above, since we can know nothing with certainty, our attitudes that would cause us to approach with "closed hands," self-righteousness, worldly knowing, or even aggression based on our feeling that we are right, make no sense and are counterproductive.

Shitou suggests here that we develop a conviction which gives priority to our state of mind, above all else, for that's what shapes our intentions, our karma, and our ability to practice, meaning "to walk," with "open hands" and an open heart.

Tags:

Thousands of words, myriad interpretations,

Shitou is saying that his real goal is "wake folks up." (MY)

In Buddhist philosophy, and Shitou is implying it here, however, there is another answer: *meditate to wake up*. For only with meditation can we end our dualistic confusion and suffering. If words alone could do it, we would have done it long ago. If some intellectual understanding were all it took, we would have thought our way out of suffering eons ago. The discursive mind, however, is not enough.

To end our suffering, we must walk beyond words, we must develop the new innocent awareness that arises from meditation. This new awareness is an awareness that experiences the world without producing suffering.

We are no longer manhandled and jerked around by every sensory perception, instead we walk a new path that is relaxed, calm, and peaceful.

Looking at this line in another way, we see is that what we are typically confronted with in nature is a vast network of interdependent and continuous processes, and carving out particular phenomena (person, place, thing, etc.) for explanation or for use in explanations depends more on our explanatory interests, normal limits on human cognition, and *language*, than on the nature of the conditions themselves. And at this we are constantly tripping on our words, thousands of years of words!

What we choose to see and talk about, *words* has more to do with who we are, what we have experienced in the past (karma), what we are interested in at the time, *and the language* we choose to express ourselves, than with the nature of what is “happening.” We need words to reach beyond words, but we need to be careful, Shitou is saying, how we attach or rather don’t attach to them.

Tags:

Are only to free you from obstructions.

Wow, is this a powerful understanding, and simplicity itself. These thousands of pages of scriptures—words, words, words, and more words, in English, in Sanskrit, in Chinese, in Japanese, *all offer us rafts* to free us from obstructions, to free us from our unwholesome karmic propensities which fertilize our weeds rather than uproot them, and to let us see clearly how to relax and be mindful, how to be calm when we notice our head, our hut, is covered in weeds.

So all the teachings are rafts. (X/M) And Shitou’s aim is only to give us the tools to “wake up,” to reach the other shore, to become liberated. (MY) We are to use them, Shitou is saying, to move forward along the Path, to understand how to stop “picking and choosing,” and to cross to the other side, to cross from this world of false valuing and suffering to the other side where we sit and walk in calmness and peace. Words are just to free us from obstructions! (LT)

Carl’s first teacher, Roshi Philip Whalen, would answer most of Carl’s questions with this line: “Just go sit some more.” It was frustrating, but ultimately it led to an understanding that words weren’t the answer, and weren’t not the answer, but it took decade for that to sink in.

Tags:

If you want to know the undying person in the hut,

Shitou is finally saying that both us and the hut are undying, meaning empty, and that we should leave them that way—undifferentiated. Also that material externals, like the hut, or people, like us, have no existence except as conventional stories. The hut and us, we are a place where there is no inherent value, so what is best is just to relax and be calm and meditate—not to write stories embellished with value perceptions, especially problematic is the valuing perception of our Self. It is enough, as the next and final line of the poem says, to just be, just be here as we are, just be here now. (LT)

Shitou is suggesting here that if you want to meet this simple acting and practicing monk, you’ll need to visit him in the hut. You can also be this teacher or monk, by inhabiting the hut as Shitou has done.

Tags:

Don't separate from this skin bag here and now.

Imagine with us how Carl`s pet dog might conceive of him. Our best guess is that his dog thought of him as a smelly water bag. The dog knew where Carl had been hours and sometimes days after he had been there. The dog could smell Carl, knowing that he was upstairs, even when the dog had just come in from an excursion to the backyard chasing squirrels. We are, after all, about 65% water, encased like a leather-like and watertight skin. Yup, that`s us: skin bags, smelly water bags.

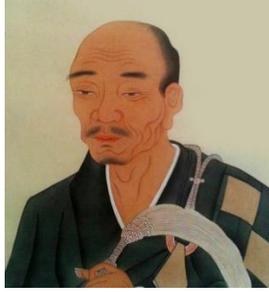
So what is Shitou concluding with here in this last line of his poem? Perhaps just this: our bodies, our physical selves, are nothing more than smelly water bags. When we think calmly, perhaps when relaxing in our house, in ourselves, when we relax, perhaps in meditation, when we don`t add any value to us, to our Self, beyond just being here, right now, just so, knowing we are a place of no value, that is what allows us to free ourselves of suffering. And if we want to know Shitou, to have him as a teacher, we must meet him as a smelly water bag, and too as No Self.

James Mitchell says, in a commentarial paragraph following the MY translation in his book, *Soto Zen Masters in China*, “The symbolic quality of the poem is really remarkable. Shitou says that his grass shack contains the entire universe, and he identifies it with his own body. If you want to 'wake up,' if you want to discover the 'person` (Buddha-mind) in the material universe, you must first attend to the body or physical self, i.e., study the true nature of phenomena (emptiness).” (MY)

“Be here, just so, peacefully abiding, with Shitou`s smelly-water-bag.” That`s how us folks can wake up. Those are Shitou`s final words to us.

Tags:

End Notes



Shitou

Stone Cao'an Song

Translation by Xu Maio

Each of the 16 lines represent a couplet from the original text (see page two)

When I met a hut, I had no precious things, ate calmly and just wanted to sleep quickly
The grass is new at first sight, and will be covered after it is broken
Live as a monk and stay in the town. No distinction between middle, inside and outside.
I don't live where the world lives, but [and] I don't love where the world loves
Although temple is small, it contains Dharma realm. Abbot's old man's phase solution
No doubt, a superior bodhisattva believes, but a middle or lower bodhisattva hears something strange
Ask this temple, whether it is bad or not. Bad or not bad, the main element exists.
Regardless of North and South, East and West, base site firmly believed to be the most
Under the pine tree, in the bright window. Jade palace and the red chamber are not right
Monks are clothed, and everything is off. At this time, mountain monks can't.
Live in this temple, take a rest. Who praises the shop seats and want everyone to buy them
When it shines back, it will return, and Koda Linggen will not turn back
I met my father and listened to the instruction. Don't give birth to retreat for sake of monk
A hundred years to give up, wave your hand and be innocent
Thousands of words, all solutions. Just teach you to be smart and not stupid
If you want to know the undead in the temple, do you leave this leather bag now?

Authors, Translators, and Commentators

Brief bios of the authors, translators, and commentators.

Shitou (pictured above) was an 8th century Chinese monk (700-790CE), a student of Huineng, the Sixth Patriarch of Chan (Chinese Zen). He would become the Eighth Patriarch after his death, and today is best known for two poems he wrote, the one here and another, the *Sandokai*, a fundamental text of the Soto Zen school.

Taigen Dan Leighton, a scriptural text translator and university professor, is the Guiding Teacher of *Ancient Dragon Zen Gate*, a Zen Temple in Chicago. This version of the poem was translated Leighton and **Kazuaki**

Tanahashi, an artist and accomplished calligrapher, author, and translator of Buddhist texts from Japanese and Chinese into English.

Ben Connelly, who wrote a personal essay-style commentary on this poem, is a priest at the Minnesota Zen Meditation Center. His commentary is in the book where we first found this translation of the poem:

https://www.amazon.com/Inside-Grass-Hut-Shitous-Classic/dp/1614291217/ref=sr_1_1?crid=2KO9HZR6LRCY7&dchild=1&keywords=inside+the+grass+hut+living+shitou%27s+classic+zen+poem&qid=1607551111&s=books&sprefix=inside+the+grass%2Caps%2C170&sr=1-1)

Authors of the alternative translation (above side-by-side with the Leighton/Tanahashi translation): was translated by **James Mitchell**, while Visiting Professor at the Foreign Affairs Graduate College of the People`s Republic of China, and **Yulie Lou**, Chair of the Philosophy Department at Beijing University, in 2006:

<https://www.amazon.com/Soto-Ancestors-China-James-Mitchell/dp/0974950238>

Miao Xu teaches Mandarin as a second language in Singapore and translated the text literally for us to use as a reference. It is the translation in the End Note.

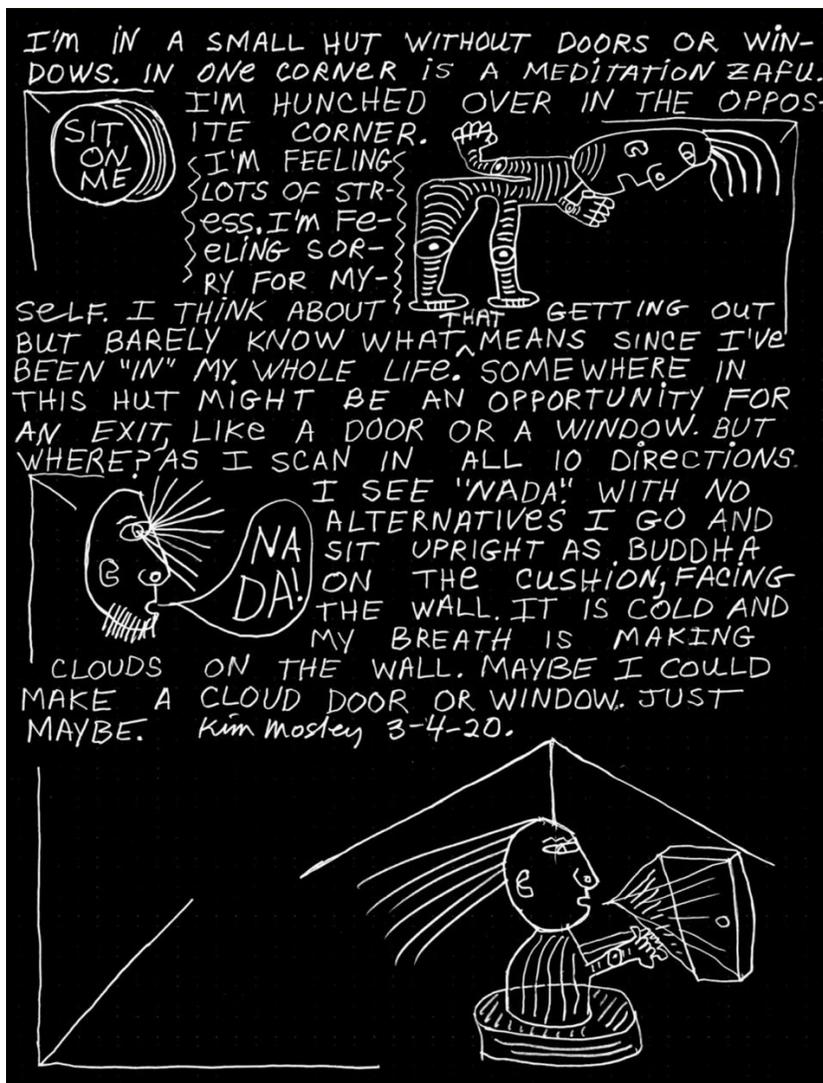
Andy Cohen and Carl Jerome developed *DeepDharma.org* and wrote most of the material on it, from commentaries, including this one, to short analyses of key teachings and other miscellanea. Their extensive commentarial materials and doctrinal notes are offered as free downloads. If you choose to distribute them, we ask only that the distribution credit the source (www.deepdharma.org) and be without charge.

Appendix

Carl and a dozen students participated in a 2021 zoom class studying Shitou's poem. Each week during February-March, the class discussed one of the seven verses in the Leighton/Tanahashi translation. Our final class featured an assignment for each student to rewrite or recreate the poem, in whatever format the student wished. We offer those here, without comment, for you to explore. If you have any questions, please email: info@deepdharma.org.

DeepDharma Seminar's Versions of Shitou's Inside the GrassHut

Kim Mosley:



Not So Simple

Buddha held up a flower and Mahākāśyapa smiled. A man lived in a grass hut for 26 years and became enlightened. Today, when I sat, I imagined I was in the stupor of simplicity. I thought both of these stories were about utter simplicity. And then I was reminded that Vimalakirti, a brilliant lay donor to the Buddha, also was in a similar 10x10 room, and assembled 40,000 (and gods). Which suggests that I need to return to the cushion and realize that within this simplicity, there must have been a great deal of confusion.



There WAS NO
room left because
the hut was
filled with
ancestral teachers.

Nilda Carlo

I have built a simple lean-to that holds no earthly value.
Within it I eat, relax, and sleep.
At first, my loosely woven hut offered small shelter,
But, over time, unhampered overgrowth has made it snug.

My life is calm within my little hut.
I could be anywhere but choose nowhere else.
And, though aware of the delightful blandishments of elsewhere,
They do not interest me.

Although my shanty is simple, it holds my entire world.
Within its 10 foot-square space, this old man awakened.
Some few others who have awakened see this man;
But those who still sleep, see only the flimsy lean-to that I live in.

However, flimsy or not, my simple hut is where I abide
Limitlessly awake within its rude walls,
Grounded on its rock foundation,
Mindful that no habitation—palatial, sumptuous, or imagined—compares.

Within the folds of my monk`s habit, I am at peace.
I don`t say this to proselytize
My way of life nor tout
The nature of where I live.

I say only, simply sit.
Experience the infinity of emptiness across time.
As your teacher, I say, just as mine did,
Gather twigs and vines and build your hut.

Then let go of your endless stories and merely sit;

Relax and sit.

Let go of all the verbiage and convoluted concepts you`ve been taught.

For my intention is that you awaken before you leave this precious life.

Inside the Grass Hut – Rewrite/Reaction (Andy Cohen)

I have spent a lifetime putting a Self together, bricks-of-karma piled one on top of the other, mortared with yet more karma, well-worn patterns of thought and feeling. These bricks are made of greed, anger or delusion, mainly delusion.

The Self always looks new, but unfamiliar simultaneously. The newness is a delusion, so is the unfamiliarity. The Self and all of its components are delusion.

I so look forward to the refuge of study and meditation, and I recognize that there are many layers to both. The first layer is that I can't effectively meditate unless I relax. Too many discursive thoughts arise from tension. When I am sitting, it is the whole world, and the brief and relative freedom from constructing more bricks-of-karma for that period is the whole World. I don't need anything else at that time, and freedom from desire and aversion is a relief, an invigoration in recognition that the sages have thought of all this before.

The sages and teachers have set an example of simplicity and monastic life. How do I follow this example in the everyday Western world? I do what they do, I study, meditate and relax. Is this enough, is this helping others – I don't know, but the sages have been right about other things and suggest this course of action, so stick to it!

Allan Shampine

I live in a grass hut.
I eat, I sleep, I practice.

I avoid attachments.
I don't live in town.
I don't socialize.

All I need is a small hut and a strong practice.
It may seem strange, but that is all you need, too.

A beautiful temple in town makes practice harder.
A simple hut in the woods cannot be surpassed.

I am at peace in this hut.
I am at peace on this mountain.

Listen to your teacher.
Work on your practice.

Don't concern yourself with what others think of you.
Relax.
Silent illumination, so many teachings, but they all say this:
Just sit and be in your body.

Margaret Barnhart

Inside the Grass Hut
Leighton/Tanahashi translation

I built a hut made out of grass and it`s simple
I eat, relax and nap in my hut.
When I finished building my hut new weeds appeared in the grass.
I`ve lived in my hut for a long time and now it is covered in weeds.

I am a calm person.
I am not stuck mentally or physically
I live in a place where people of wealth wouldn`t live
I don`t live in a worldly place

My hut is small but it contains my universe
My space is small but has greatness
I`m not sure about this, but I try not to doubt my practice
I wonder, will the hut outlive my life?

The hut is present, and yet
It has no confirmed location
It is simple but sturdy
It is exquisite in its simple beauty

When I sit I am at peace
I don`t understand everything
But my mind is free in my hut.
Who would try impress people to encourage them to sit.

Breathe in/out
God can`t be seen or turned way
I listen to the elders
I stay with your practice

Let go of your worries and relax
Open your heart to the beginner`s journey
Many paths lead toward truth
By sitting you will be set free.
If you want clarity stay connected.

THE GRASS HUT - **Jim McGuire** Interpretation

I've built a natural shelter
Where I eat, sleep & live with no suffering
I'm unconcerned with the trinkets of life

The shelter is small but adequate; it is my world
I keep the shelter clean and free of worldly concerns
Others don't understand but I'm not concerned.

I am perishable seeking emptiness in all things
The only value is in the realization of impermanence
We only seek a consistent meditation practice
No earthly palaces can compare with this state

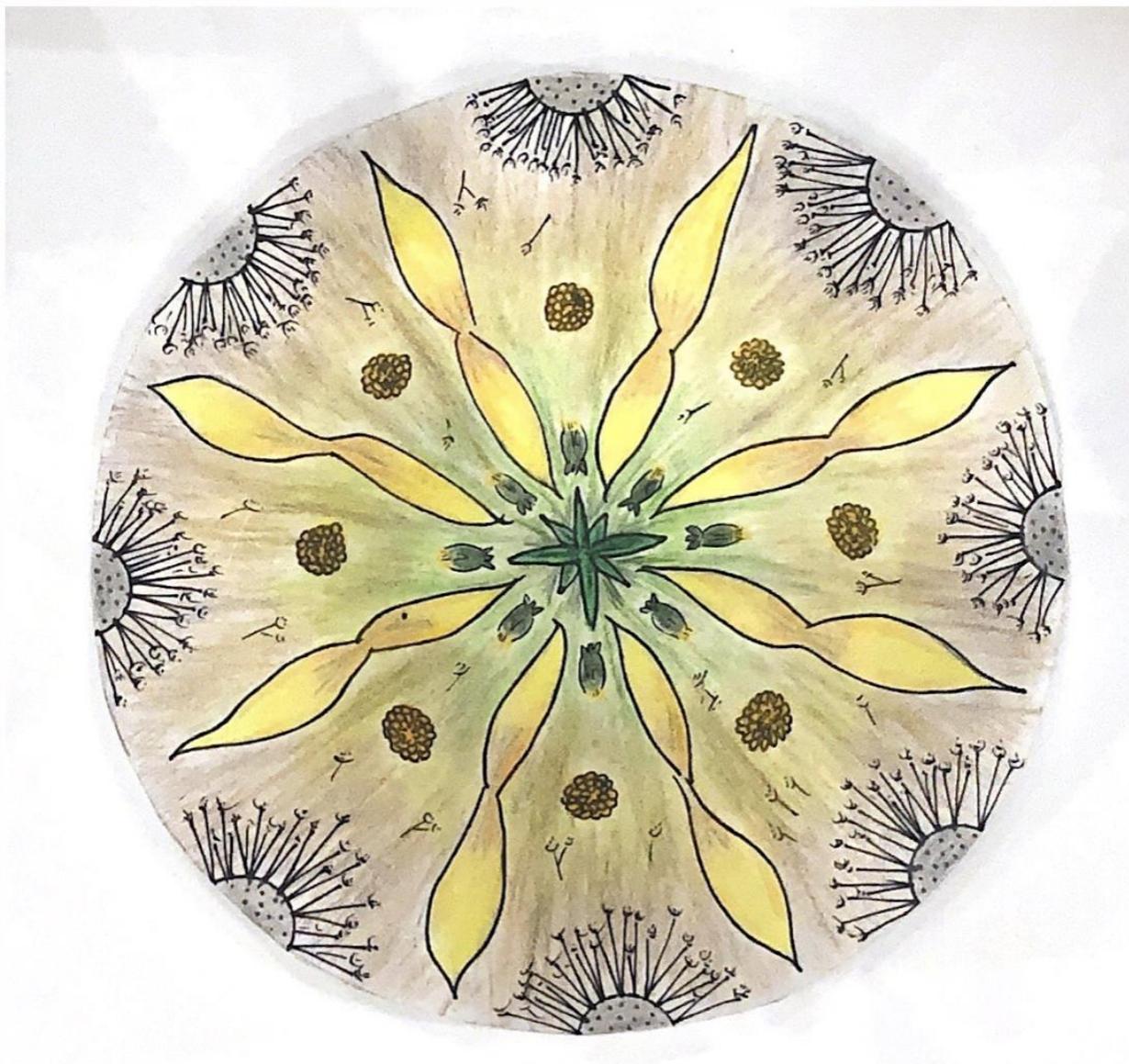
All I need is calm; simple garb
Seeking knowledge from all that arises
No need to worry about worldly effects

Don't trouble your mind with externals
Seek only emptiness and awareness of "No-Self"
Learn from the past great teachers
Seek Faith, a conviction based on reason and experience

Let go of past conditions or Karma
Live with "No-Fear"
Meditation yields a world with no suffering
Seek emptiness through meditation
We are all impermanent and there is no real permanent self.

Kristin Nicolson

Grass Hut Mandala - Awareness of my stories as I create must be part of the lesson!



Richard Tessell

Inside the Grass Hut

A grass hut is a simple abode; there are some who would say it is not the best location. I say the location is perfect and like all things, its value is not intrinsic but assigned.

All that resides in the hut have no intrinsic value either. The things inside of it. Yours truly, no exception.

The simple things are all I need, some food to eat and time to rest. What else is there?

The hut became covered with weeds, as a hut does. Conditions are what they are...now my simple hut is simply covered with weeds. The roof will break, more weeds will grow. Nothing is permanent. I sleep peacefully because of this understanding.

I am calm in my hut. Alone but connected to everything, I know. The hut is not mine and I am not just inside of it. My existence, the hut's existence and everything inside it and outside of it are interdependent. My calmness about this hut, the world around it may confuse others, so I live alone but infinitely connected. I don't love the way others do, assign my affinity or aversions in the way that most people do.

Since my hut is connected to everything there is no way to separate it from the rest of the world.

I seek not the worldly pleasures, am not upset by the things that others are, and my lack of suffering is strange to others. I do not concern myself with changing conditions or attachments.

I do not attach to permanent things; Even kingdoms are empty. No matter which direction they reside. My understanding of the Dharma keeps me on the ground. True to the absolute reality.

No fancy palace can distract me.

While meditating I am at peace. Without attachments and with recognition of the truth, I have no concerns with anything. No suffering. No gestures to indicate my desires. No actions or things to display them. Only a monk in a grass hut. At peace.

I am not the only one who knew this. There were others. Masters who I learn from. Their teachings continue to instruct me. So, I built a hut.

Now I teach others the path. Lots of interpretations and words to understand what is simple.

Freedom from suffering is possible and within our reach. But the world wants us to be distracted by the physical. The mind needs to be trained to prevent that.