DO NOT BE A WILD FOX ZEN ‘MASTER’!
- SHEN SHI’AN -

In the famous *Wild Fox Koan (Public Record)* (野狐公案), after Chan Master Baizhang (百丈禅师: 749-814) gave a teaching, with the departure of everyone, an old man, who was a fox spirit in disguise remained. When asked who he is, he answered that he was actually a monk in the ancient Kasyapa Buddha’s time, who was practising the Dharma on the same mountain. When a learner asked him, “Do great spiritual cultivators still fall into cause and effect?” (大修行人还落因果否?), he replied, “Not fall into cause and effect.” (不落因果。) Due to this statement, he was reborn for five hundred lives as a fox spirit, amid was unable to be liberated from his form.

He then asked the Master to compassionately guide him to be liberated from his suffering. The Master replied to ask him the same question again. After it was asked, the Master replied, “Not ignorant of cause and effect.” (不昧因果。) Realising this right answer, he prostrated in gratitude, saying that with indebtedness to the Master’s kindness, he will be liberated from his form at the back of the mountain’s cliff. As he requested for a monk’s funeral and burial, the next day, the Master led a great assembly there and found a dead fox, and thus conducted the rites accordingly.

Great spiritual cultivators, who are completely liberated, do not fall into being trapped by cause and effect as they are not ignorant of the workings of cause and effect. However, as beginners, there are bound to be trapped by cause and effect.

Thus, they should be mindful of it. If beginners imagine that they can be great spiritual cultivators straightaway with only some theoretical understanding of karma without actual practice that leads to realisation, they might forgo living with morality as the foundation of spiritual betterment, thus drifting further away from liberation.

As ‘not fall into cause and effect’ was misunderstood to negate the existence of karma, the negative consequences were severe, leading to loss of human rebirth. As ‘not ignorant of cause and effect’ affirms the existence of karma, understanding this led to liberation from animal rebirth. The wild fox probably represents untamed ignorance mixed with some cunning and presumptuous ‘intelligence’, while animals are predominantly spiritually ignorant. Due to this incident, the term ‘Wild Fox Zen (Chan)’ (野狐禅) was coined to label those who make similar mistakes of assuming theoretical understanding as practical realisation, of teaching and behaving as if realised when not, of putting aside cause and effect when still ignorant of it.

The monk was wrong for having taught from the ultimate point of view of emptiness to a beginner, who should had been taught from the relative point of view of (relating morally to that with) forms first. This incident is a grave reminder of how even teaching wrongly by a single word might have drastic karmic consequences for both teachers and students. This is why we have to be very mindful in all manners of our communication, be they about the Dharma or otherwise.

宁可著有如须弥，
不可著空如芥子。

- 古法语

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- 古法语

Rather to have attachment to existence [or form as big] as [Mount] Sumeru,
Rather to have attachment to existence [or form as big] as [Mount] Sumeru,
do not have attachment to emptiness [as small] as a mustard seed.

- Ancient Dharma Saying

学说之误人，
只在最初几希之间。
其后之结果，
则无法可收拾矣。

- 净土宗十三祖印光大师
(复谢慧霖居士书十六)

Those saying theoretical teachings that mislead others, only, in the beginning, [do not take] much time [to do so]. Their later fruits borne [from negative karma], are however unable to be repaired [quickly].

- Pure Land Tradition’s 13th Patriarch
Great Master Yinguang
(16th reply letter to Layman Xie Huilin)