

Case 196 - Fee

Master Suku and her three apprentices had spent several sweltering days crossing a weedy marshland, seeking a temple somewhere near its center. The thickness of the air had long since stifled any desire for conversation. For many hours the only sounds were the buzzing of microdrones and the group's own squelching footsteps.

Finally they arrived at a rickety structure on stilts, housing only one abbess and a dozen novices.

"The Drowning Temple is a poor one in every respect," said the abbess. "Our investments are currently under water, and the average grade of our novices is well below C level. But name your fee for speaking and we'll see what we can do."

"We trade only in knowledge," said Suku. "Have your temple lecture on the first day, and mine will lecture on the day following."

"This pleases us," said the abbess.

"Then make space for us to sleep on the floor," said Suku. "Come the morning we will learn from each other."

When the preparations were made, and the last lantern had been turned down for the night, Suku's eldest apprentice whispered: "Master, what can these people teach us?"

Suku made a Ø sign on the moldy floorboards, fell back on her mat, and closed her eyes.



On the first day, Suku and her apprentices sat patiently while the novices of the Drowning Temple spoke of their doings and observations. As he expected, Suku's eldest apprentice heard nothing that he did not already know. Indeed, he found some of the Drowning Temple's coding practices so completely absurd that he had to mask his laughter by coughing violently and blaming his outbursts on a rare pollen allergy.

On the second day, Suku's eldest apprentice spoke for a full two hours on the superior coding practices of his own temple. Yet he found himself so beleaguered by challenges from the Drowning Temple that he nearly walked out in frustration. To make matters worse, some of novices of the Drowning Temple had apparently contracted his unique pollen allergy.

That night, Suku quietly asked the eldest apprentice what he had learned from the novices.

The eldest apprentice made the Ø sign of the empty-set on the moldy floorboards, fell back on his mat, and closed his eyes.

Suku whacked him on the nose and repeated her question to the others.

The second apprentice answered, "Our eldest knows how to chastise, but not how to convince."

The third apprentice answered, "Our eldest wishes to make others accept, but has failed to first make them reject."

"Excellent," said Suku. "Some of us have learned, so our Fee has been paid."

She grabbed the index finger of the eldest apprentice, saying to him: "You speak to your peers as if they were empty registers waiting to be filled with the bits of your wisdom. Ours may be a dry digital world, but it is built atop wetware, which is squishy and irrational and prone to overheating. You cannot flip a brain from zero to one simply by praising the one. You must start at the zero, extoll its virtues, explore its faults, exhort your listeners to look beyond it. To weigh the zero against the one, the listener must have both in mind together. Only when they have freely chosen the one will they abandon the zero."

Still holding the index finger of the eldest apprentice, Suku slowly drew a zero on the floorboards and a one across its center. Considering the symbol anew, the eldest was corrected.