

Case 2: Bodhidharma's "Emptiness"

Introduction A man presented a jewel three times but didn't escape punishment. When a luminous jewel is thrown to anyone, few do not draw their sword. For an impromptu guest there is no impromptu host; what's appropriate provisionally is not appropriate for the real. If unusual treasures and rare jewels cannot be put to use, I'll bring out the head of a dead cat—look!

Case **Emperor Wu of Liang asked Great Teacher Bodhidharma, "What is the highest meaning of the holy truths?"**
Bodhidharma said, "Empty—there is no holy."
The emperor said, "Who are you facing me?"
Bodhidharma said, "Don't know."
The emperor didn't understand. Bodhidharma subsequently crossed the Yangtse River, came to Shaolin, and faced a wall for nine years.

Verse Empty—nothing holy:
The approach is far off.
Succeeding, he swings the axe without injuring the nose;
Failing, he drops the pitcher without looking back.
Still and silent, coolly he sat at Shaolin:
In silence he completely brought up the true imperative.
The clear moon of autumn turns its frosty disc;
The Milky Way thin the Dipper hangs down its handle in the night.
In succession the robe and bowl have been imparted to descendants;
From this humans and divinities have made medicine and disease.

The Book of Serenity, Thomas Cleary, tr.

Notes:

From the commentary:

Later, Emperor Wu after all 'thought about a superior man after he was gone' and personally wrote an epitaph for him, which said,

I saw him without seeing,

Met him without meeting him—

now as of old

I regret and lament this.

At that time the patriarch Bodhidharma may have been a bit lacking in expedient technique, but it is hardly realized that unless the medicine stuns you it won't cure the disease.

"Succeeding, he swings the axe without injuring the nose." As Zhuangzi was attending a funeral procession, as they passed the grave of Huisi he turned and said to his followers: As Ying Ren was plastering a wall he splashed a bit on his nose, a spot as big as a fly wing; he had Jiang Shi cut it off. Jiang Shi swung his axe, creating a breeze, and cut it off with a whoosh—closing his eyes, letting his hand swing freely, he cut away the whole spot without injuring Ying Ren's nose. Since the death of these people, I have no one capable of being my disciples."

"Failing, he drops the pitcher without looking back." Meng Min of the latter Han dynasty stayed in Taiyuan during his travels; once as he was carrying a pitcher, it fell to the ground, but he went on without looking back. Guo Linzong saw this and asked him the meaning. Meng Min replied, "The pitcher is already broken; what's the use of looking back?"

"The clear moon of autumn turns its frosty disc." This indirectly makes use of Fayán's poem, "Everywhere I go, the frosty night's moon falls as it may into the valleys ahead," bringing to light the incomparable Way of ultimate truth.

"The Milky Way thin, the Dipper hangs down its handle in the night." In a talk in the teaching hall Tiantong (Hongzhi) has said, "In the spherical dot shines the uttermost subtlety; where wisdom is effortless, knowledge remains. When clinging thought is

cleared away nothing else is left; in the middle of the night the Dipper handle hangs down in the Milky Way.” These two verses are like a mute serving as a messenger—he points it out to people but can’t express it.

From the glossary:

host and guest Teacher and student; absolute and relative; mind and environment; permanent and transient.

Teaching of Bodhidharma

Everything that appears in the three realms comes from the mind. Hence buddhas of the past and future teach mind to mind without bothering about definitions.

But if they don't define it, what do they mean by mind?

You ask. That’s your mind. I answer. That’s my mind. If I had no mind, how could I answer? If you had no mind, how could you ask? That which asks is your mind. Through endless kalpas without beginning, whatever you do, wherever you are, that’s your real buddha. *This mind is the buddha* says the same thing. Beyond this mind you’ll never find another buddha. To search for enlightenment or nirvana beyond this mind is impossible. The reality of your own self-nature, the absence of cause and effect, is what’s meant by mind. Your mind is nirvana. You might think you can find a buddha or enlightenment somewhere beyond the mind, but such a place doesn’t exist.

Trying to find a buddha or enlightenment is like trying to grab space. Space has a name but no form. It’s not something you can pick up or put down. And you certainly can’t grab it. Beyond this mind you’ll never see a buddha. The buddha is a product of your mind. Why look for a buddha beyond this mind?

...If you don’t understand by yourself, you’ll have to find a teacher to get to the bottom of life and death. But unless he sees his nature, such a person isn’t a teacher.

To find a buddha all you have to do is see your nature. Your nature is the buddha. And the buddha is the person who is free: free of plans, free of cares. If you don’t see your nature and run around all day looking somewhere else, you’ll never find a buddha. The truth is, there’s nothing to find. But to reach such an understanding you need a teacher and you need to struggle to make yourself understand. Life and death are important. Don’t suffer them in vain. There’s no advantage in deceiving yourself.

...People who see their mind is the buddha don't need to shave their head. Laymen are buddhas too. Unless they see their nature, people who shave their head are simply fanatics.

But since married laymen don't give up sex, how can they become buddhas?

I only talk about seeing your nature. I don't talk about sex simply because you don't see your nature. Once you see your nature, sex is basically immaterial. It ends along with your delight in it. Even if some habits remain, they can't harm you, because your nature is essentially pure. Despite dwelling in a material body of four elements, your nature is basically pure. It can't be corrupted....

Once you recognize your moving, miraculously aware nature, yours is the mind of all buddhas....But this mind isn't somewhere outside the material body of the four elements. Without this mind we can't move. The body has no awareness. Like a pant or stone, the body has no nature. So how does it move? It's the mind that moves. Language and behavior, perception and conception are all functions of the moving mind. All motion is the mind's motion. Motion is its function.

—excerpts from *The Zen Teachings of Bodhidharma*, by Red Pine, Bloodstream sermon, p. 9

The story of presenting the jewel three times from Transmission of Light (Cleary), p. 103-4)

About Bodhidharma

28th Patriarch of Buddhism in the lineage going back to the Buddha. Probably early 5th C. Came to China from India and is held as the founder of Ch'an, or Zen.

The account of his encounter with Emperor Wu forms also the first koan in the Blue Cliff Record.

The *Anthology of the Patriarchal Hall* says that in 527, Bodhidharma visited Emperor Wu of Liang, a fervent patron of Buddhism:

Emperor Wu: "How much karmic merit have I earned for ordaining Buddhist monks, building monasteries, having sutras copied, and commissioning Buddha images?"

Bodhidharma: "None. Good deeds done with worldly intent bring good karma, but no merit."

Emperor Wu: "So what is the highest meaning of noble truth?"

Bodhidharma: "There is no noble truth, there is only emptiness."

Emperor Wu: "Then, who is standing before me?"

Bodhidharma: "I know not, Your Majesty."

—This account from Broughton, Jeffrey L. (1999), *The Bodhidharma Anthology: The Earliest Records of Zen*, Berkeley: University of California Press.

The emperor did not understand. After this Bodhidharma crossed the Yangtse River and came to the kingdom of Wei. Later the emperor brought this up to Master Chih and asked him about it. Master Chih asked, "Does your majesty know who this man is?" The emperor said, "I don't know." Master Chih said, "He is the Mahasattva Avalokitesvara, transmitting the Buddha Mind Seal." The emperor felt regretful, so he wanted to send an emissary to go invite Bodhidharma to return. Master Chih told him, "Your majesty, don't say that you will send someone to fetch him back. Even if everyone in the whole country were to go after him, he still wouldn't return."

—*The Blue Cliff Record*, (Cleary) case 1

These are the legends of our tradition and the first patriarch in the Zen lineage that claims to extend back to the Buddha. Like all histories they are constructed, weaving together a narrative from fragments of truth and belief. [D. T. Suzuki](#) wrote that Chan's growth in popularity during the 7th and 8th centuries attracted criticism that it had "no authorized records of its direct transmission from the founder of Buddhism" and that Chan historians made Bodhidharma the 28th patriarch of Buddhism in response to such attacks.

—Suzuki, D.T. (1949), *Essays in Zen Buddhism*, New York: Grove Press,