

Protochan 1

Bodhidharma and the Emperor Wu

By

Mary Jaksch

One of the most beautiful and profound legends in Zen is the meeting of Bodhidharma and the Emperor Wu. The Emperor Wu of the Liang Dynasty was a very cultured and devout man who had studied Confucian wisdom and then embraced Buddhism teachings. He lived in the first half of the 5th century CE and was known for this devotion to practice. During his reign, Buddhism began to flourish in China. Though he was a learned man, he was also tough and feisty. His name ‘Wu’ means ‘Warrior’.

In contrast, we know next to nothing about the historical personage of Bodhidharma. The legend of Bodhidharma is a braid that has been woven by many generations of teachers. Each generation added a new strand of emphasis and detail. Whether Bodhidharma actually existed or not is unknown, but the legend carries the core of Zen teachings and is one of the rich gifts to come down to us from our ancient ancestors. The story of Bodhidharma and the Emperor Wu appear as Case 1 in the Blue Cliff Record, the repository of Zen koans compiled by Xuedou and edited with commentaries by Yuanwu.

Legends are far more potent than mere historical biographies. Legends encapsulate teachings. To really imbibe the teachings, we have to make the legend personal. This is what we do in koan work; we sit with a koan, such as the story of Bodhidharma and the Emperor Wu, until we become intimate with it. Then we suddenly find that Bodhidharma gets up and stretches his legs, eats breakfast and gazes out to sea!

Here is the legend:

Bodhidharma met the Emperor Wu from when he first reached China on his dangerous voyage from India.

When Bodhidharma appeared before him, the Emperor said to him,
“I have built temples and ordained monks; what is my merit?”

Bodhidharma replied, “no merit.”

Yuanwu, the editor of the Blue Cliff Record, says in his commentary to the koan, ‘If you can penetrate this statement, “No merit”, you can meet Bodhidharma personally.

How can you meet Bodhidharma personally?

You can be sure that the Emperor was shocked at this answer. The idea that merit gained through good deeds helps the practitioner reach enlightenment and attain nirvana, the final dissolution of self, is a key teaching of Theravada Buddhism. But Bodhidharma wipes all these ideas away with his uncompromising response, “No merit!” As Aitken Roshi points out, ‘merit’ is *te* or *toku*, ‘...the virtue and responsibility one accumulates by yielding wisdom, treasure, and power.’¹ Maybe we all fall into the trap of expecting our accomplishments to be honoured. Just think of all the areas where you have gained experience and expertise. Do you expect respect or at least acknowledgment?

I remember when I was on the phone to Aitken Roshi just after my Transmission ceremony. He said, “Your practice begins now!” He was pointing to the fact that practice begins anew in each moment. If you carry anything with you, any idea or sense of accomplishment, it darkens the light.

The Emperor then asks Bodhidharma,

“What is the first principle of the holy teachings?”

Bodhidharma replied, “Vast emptiness, nothing holy.”

This is a profound teaching which one could spend a whole life reviewing, discovering depth upon depth. Please don’t think this is some kind of Buddhist teaching. In fact koans have nothing at all to do with Buddhism or Zen. They are truths that offer profound nourishment for our ordinary, everyday life. Yuanwu’s teacher Wutsu said, “If only you penetrate ‘Vast emptiness, nothing holy’, then you can return home and sit in peace.’ When this is clear, you find that you have never left home and you can live a life of joy and equanimity.

What is the emptiness Bodhidharma is talking about? In our ordinary, discursive way of thinking, the word ‘emptiness’ implies a relation to something. We tend to ask, ‘Empty of what?’ This is the way the human mind works: We cannot, in ordinary consciousness, imagine conceive of something that is not in relation to something else and has nothing to compare it with. This is the meaning of ‘vast’. It means that there are no boundaries. Even the word ‘vast’ is misleading. Hakuin, the 17th-century Zen master, makes this point in his commentary on the Heart Sutra²: He criticizes the term *mahā* (as in *mahā prajña pāramitā*, the Great Perfection of Wisdom) and says:

There is not a thing in all the universe you can compare to it. Most folk think it means large and vast. Wrong! Wrong!...Bring me a small wisdom!’

Some say that ‘emptiness’ means that all things are devoid of an essential self. But this is still in the realm of ideas, and ideas have no power for the Way. ‘Emptiness’ is not a concept; it is an experience. When you truly experience ‘emptiness’ you find freedom! You are then not trapped in the confines of what and who you consider yourself to be. As you will hear in a moment, Bodhidharma reiterated this point in his interchange with the Emperor.

But before we continue on, I would like to take up Bodhidharma’s ‘nothing holy’. What does that mean?

A short while ago a student asked me, “Does Zen allow us to see what is transcendent?” I said, “Zen allows us to see that there is nothing transcendent and nothing to transcend.” The student was upset and said, ‘But, if there nothing transcendent, why then do we practice?’

There is a great human desire to transcend. We want to be more ‘spiritual’ and access something ‘higher’ than our ordinary life of human frustration and suffering. We yearn for ‘heaven’ instead of ‘earth’ and want to taste what is ‘holy’ instead of what is ‘profane’. We want to live forever, and things to remain the same, instead of experiencing the constant change and decline that ends in illness and death. We try and find hidden meaning in the ordinary, as if clues to the transcendent are somehow

hidden in the ordinary. This yearning for the transcendent is a cause of suffering. We are like prawns in the boiling water trying to jump out. Impossible!

What if there were nothing holy? What if there were not the slightest gap between holy and profane? What if each moment revealed itself as what you are searching for? Not just the special moments when you look out to sea or experience the spacious stillness of mountains. No, each and every moment. The whiff of coffee in the mornings, the restless mind in zazen, the drowsiness in the afternoon, the twinge in the knees: each moment shining; each moment blazing with the truth you are yearning for! To experience this intimately and clearly is the gate of joy and ease. This is what our practice is about.

When the Emperor heard “Vast emptiness, nothing holy”, he was flummoxed. Finally he rallied and asked, “Who is standing before me?”

Bodhidharma said, “I don’t know.”

These words echo throughout space and time. It is like seeing into a pool of water, right to the bottomless bottom. What is this ‘not-knowing’?

There are really three different kinds of not-knowing. The first one carries the meaning of “I haven’t got a clue!” which indicates a lack of intellectual understanding; the second one is a kind of blankness. And then there is Bodhidharma’s “I don’t know.” When you truly relinquish all concepts about yourself and the universe, when you completely empty yourself out, what are you left with?

Bodhidharma and the many teachers after him who have co-created this story have left a trail for us to follow. It is the way to freedom without hindrance. When we taste that perfect freedom, what do we do then? How do we live it?

There is a dialogue between Dongshan and his teacher Nanyuan that illuminates this point. Dongshan is at the end of his training and is ready to go on pilgrimage and to start teaching in his own right.

When the Dongshan took his leave, Nanyuan said, “Make a thorough study of the Buddha Dharma, and broadly benefit the world.”

Dongshan said, “I have no question about studying the Buddha Dharma, but what is it to broadly benefit the world?”

Dongshan understood well that there is no end to this journey of practice. But he wondered about what it might mean to “broadly benefit the world”. ‘Broadly’ here means ‘without limits’. To ‘broadly benefit the world’ is what each one of us vows when we chant, ‘I vow to save the many beings.’ So, what does it mean to ‘broadly benefit the world’?

Nanyuan said, “Not to dismiss a single thing.”³

Nanyuan’s remark illuminates how we might express in our life the realisation of the emptiness of all things, and the experience that we ourselves are unknown and unknowable. The more we live into this truth, the more we become fully human. What then is left, when all concepts are dashed away? Just this human life of simple moments: waking up in the morning, waving to your neighbour as you walk to the car, stroking the cat, hearing the birdsong at dusk, breathing in and breathing out. Just this.

© Mary Jaksch 2006

¹ Aitken, R., 1990, *The Gateless Barrier*, San Francisco, North Point Press.

² Waddell, N., 1996, *Zen Words for the Heart*, New York, Random House, p7.

³ From the Record of Dongshan, case 18. See Powell, W., ed., *The Record of Tung-shan*, Honolulu, University of Hawaii Press, pp. 30.