

## Bodhidharma Pacifies the Mind

By  
Mary Jaksch

The story about Huike is a powerful legend connected with Bodhidharma. As with the story of Bodhidharma's meeting with Emperor Wu, this legend is not a historical event, but a teaching about the nature of the mind. Huike, as you may remember, was a central figure of early Chan and, indeed the tradition sees him as the second Chinese Ancestor. Here is the story:

*Shenkuang [Huike] went over to the Shaolin temple and day and night beseeched Bodhidharma for instruction. The Master always sat in zazen facing the wall and paid no attention to his entreaties. One evening in December, there was a snowstorm but Shenkuang stood unmoving before Bodhidharma right through the night. In the morning the snow reached above his knees. Bodhidharma took pity on him and said, "You have been standing in the snow for a long time. What is it you're seeking?"*

*Shenkuang said in bitter tears, "I beseech you, Master, open the gate of the Dharma and save all of us beings."*

*Bodhidharma said, "The incomparable truth of the Buddhas can only be attained by constant striving—practicing what cannot be practiced, bearing the unbearable. How can you, with your small virtue and wisdom, and your easy-going and conceited mind, dare to aspire to the true teaching? It is only so much labour lost."*

*With this, Shenkuang secretly drew his knife and cut off his arm, placing it before Bodhidharma. At this, Bodhidharma relented and accepted him as a disciple, giving him the Dharma name Huike (Light of Wisdom).*

*Huike said, "Your disciple's mind has no peace yet. I beg you, Master, please put it to rest."*

*Bodhidharma said, "Bring me your mind, and I will put it to rest."*

*Huike said, "I have searched for my mind, but I cannot find it."*

*Bodhidharma said, "I have completely put it to rest for you."<sup>1</sup>*

There are various version of this story in the tradition. I have here cobbled together two different versions, one is the bare-bones outline of the meeting of these two Zen worthies that Wumen offers in case number two of the Wumenkuan. And the other is a version that we find in the *Transmission of the Light*, a 10<sup>th</sup> century collection of enlightenment stories.<sup>2</sup>

Who was Huike? In contrast to Bodhidharma, Huike left some historical traces. We know that the group of early Chan practitioners in the 6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> century CE—that some scholars refer to as 'Protochan'—gathered around Huike as a central figure. Their common focus was on Bodhidharma's *Treatise on the Two Entrances and Four Practices*. It would seem as though he was already an experienced practitioner when he came to study with Bodhidharma and he went on to teach in Northern China, especially around Luoyang.<sup>3</sup> In the historical records there is actually a reference to Huike's severed arm. Daoxuan published the *Record of Eminent Monks in 645CE* in which he recounts that wandering bandits cut off Huike's arm.

Historical accounts are in a way less important than myths. After all, they only apply to one particular person. Myths, on the other hand, have been fashioned over many generations, and are imbued with the power of wisdom. They connect with us personally through time and space on many different levels. This story of Huike cutting off his arm is awe-inspiring and can fuel our aspiration for practice. The image of Huike standing in deep snow with steaming red blood flowing into the pristine whiteness is unforgettable!

Huike's earnest entreaty to Bodhidharma is very moving:

"I beseech you, Master, open the gate of the Dharma and save all of us beings."

His bitter tears and the depth of his spiritual despair have washed away any sense of self-importance. This reminds me of Quinshui (Ch'ing-shui) appearing before his teacher, Caoshan, saying,

*"I am Qingshui, solitary and destitute. Please give me alms."*<sup>4</sup>

Both Huike and Quinshui have reached a place in their life where they can find nothing to hold on to and nothing to stand upon. They feel a deep yearning, a spiritual hunger that is all-consuming. This is a condition that many earnest seekers on a spiritual path experience. In the Christian tradition, St. John of the Cross named it 'The Dark Night of the Soul'. Often there is an existential question at the centre of the Dark Night, whether it is be wordless and intuitively felt, or expressed in a question. The intensity and spiritual importance of such a quest creates a deep unrest of the mind.

Huike comes before Bodhidharma with complete spiritual nakedness. He is driven by his deep aspiration to see into the nature of reality. He wants Bodhidharma to light up the path for him and make him see. His plea is heart-rending. But Bodhidharma can't give it to him. Because it can't be given; it can't be shown. Each and everyone on this path has to see it for him- or herself. Why can't it be given? Because is not outside of you. As Dogen said, 'If you cannot find the truth right where you are, where else do you expect to find it?'

In response to his plea, Bodhidharma, fierce old teacher that he was, berates Huike:

"How can you, with your small virtue and wisdom, and your easy-going and conceited mind, dare to aspire to the true teaching?"

Well, that's quite a harsh response! Maybe Bodhidharma was testing Huike's resolve. There is also another point here: This question is a central one on the spiritual path. I remember sitting my first sesshin with Aitken Roshi many years ago now. I had asked him to take me right back to the koan Mu and start koan study again right from the beginning. One day I had a waking dream in the zendo, a *makyo* experience. I was standing on the steps of a huge palace. The door was open, but I couldn't walk on. I said to myself, "Who am I to enter?" When I talked to Roshi about this, he said, "Anyone who is sincerely on a spiritual path, no matter of what kind, comes to this question, "Who am I to enter?""

*You with your small virtue and wisdom, and your easy-going and conceited mind—* doesn't this describe every single one of us? How then dare we aspire?

To recognise and accept with humility our own weakness and fallibility is an important step in the process of awakening. But aspiration has nothing whatsoever to do with being conceited! Aspiration is the expression of our innermost being. The ancient teachers called it *Bodhicitta*, the Mind of Awakening.

Recognising the strength of Huike's aspiration, Bodhidharma says, "*Bring me your mind, and I will put it to rest.*" So, instead of offering Huike an answer, Bodhidharma gives him a koan. You can be sure that Huike carried the question, 'What is this mind?' for a long time, maybe for months or even years.

What is the point of working with a question or koan?

Recently I found a poem by Rainer Maria Rilke which explores this in a beautiful way:

Be patient to all that is unsolved in your heart  
And try to love the questions themselves,  
Like locked rooms and like books  
That are written in a foreign tongue.  
Do not now seek the answer,  
Which cannot yet be given to you  
Because you would not yet be able to live them.  
And the point is, to live everything.  
Live the question now.  
Perhaps you will then gradually, without noticing it,  
Live along some distant day into the answer.

Finally Huike things open up for Huike. He comes back before Bodhidharma and says, "*I have searched for my mind, but I cannot find it.*" This is Huike's realisation. It is the same point that Bodhidharma made when the Emperor Wu asked him, "Who are you, standing there before me?" Bodhidharma said, "I don't know."

Bodhidharma says, "*I have completely put it to rest for you.*" What is he saying? He's certainly not saying, "Well, now you won't be troubled any more!" He is pointing to the nature of reality.

What then is this complete rest?

Bodhidharma is pointing to the fact that all things—though they may come and go, be born and die—are complete and eternally at rest.

If you take this as an idea, it has no power. But when we truly see into that complete rest, then our life is transformed. However, there is another step. As Rilke points out: *the point is, to live everything.* How can we live this truth? We may see into this truth in a flash. But a life-time may not be enough to fully express this truth through the way we live!

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<sup>1</sup> Aitken, R., 1990, *The Gateless Gate*, San Francisco, Northpoint Press, p.248, and Cook, F., 2003, transl., *Transmitting the Light*, Boston, Wisdom Press, p. 154.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid. p. 26.

<sup>3</sup> Rae, J., 2003, *Seeing Through Zen*, Berkeley, University of California Press, p. 28

<sup>4</sup> Wumenkuan Case 10.