

Bodhidharma's Zen

Bodhidharma wanted to help the emperor understand that to really know, one must transcend knowing and not knowing.

BODHIDHARMA WAS ORIGINALLY from India, the twenty-eighth Buddhist Patriarch in a lineage stretching back to Shakyamuni Buddha. He was originally the prince of a kingdom in South India. One day, Hannyatara,² the twenty-seventh Patriarch, arrived in the kingdom, and Bodhidharma's father presented Hannyatara with a beautiful jewel. According to the historical record, it was referred to as the most valuable jewel in the world, a priceless treasure. Upon receiving it, Hannyatara asked the three princes of the kingdom, "This is a precious jewel, but is it the most precious jewel in the world?" The two older princes both said that it was, that there was no jewel more precious. But the third prince, Bodhidharma, said, "The mind that perceives this jewel as being the most precious, that mind itself is even more precious." Hannyatara was delighted with this answer and asked the king's permission to make Bodhidharma his disciple. Of course, this story is a fabrication written long after Bodhidharma's era.

Bodhidharma is known as the person who brought Zen to China. But what exactly did he transmit to China? It was the mind of Zen. The story of his meeting with Hannyatara when he was a

young prince was invented to support this transmission. Be that as it may, Bodhidharma did become Hanniyatara's disciple and after completing his training became his successor. It was Hanniyatara who ordered him to go to China. There are so few historical sources related to Bodhidharma that for a time many scholars believed he never really existed. However his existence is generally accepted these days, although he may be a representation of several historical figures. In any case, Bodhidharma traveled from India to China. There are two theories about how he got there. According to one theory he crossed the mountains of Tibet en route to China. According to the second he traveled to China by sea. This second theory is the more commonly accepted of the two.

When Bodhidharma arrived, China was divided into three kingdoms, the southernmost of which was called Ryo. In the capital, Nanking, Bodhidharma met with the emperor of Ryo. The emperor's name was Butei. The character for *Bu* in his name means fighting. In Chinese history there are four famous emperors named Bu. Three of them suppressed Buddhism; only Emperor Butei of Ryo supported Buddhism. He'd been a Taoist for a time but converted to Buddhism. He studied Buddhism in depth, translated sutras, and wrote commentaries on them. He built many great temples, invited many monks and nuns to his palace, and made donations to them. According to the beliefs of his day, he had performed many good deeds in support of Buddhism.

When Bodhidharma came to see him, the emperor asked, "Since I've done so many good deeds, will there be any merit for me in this life or the next?" Bodhidharma answered "*Muku doku*," which, translated literally, means "no merit." You must be careful when you come across Zen expressions that appear to be negative like this one. *Mu*, the first character of the phrase *muku doku*, is negative, but the expression itself does not simply mean that there's no merit. What

Bodhidharma intended to communicate was that one should not hope for merit from doing good deeds. Instead, truly great deeds are performed without attachment or hope for reward.

The Zen that Bodhidharma transmitted to China teaches us to act out of nonattachment. Please don't misunderstand the meaning of nonattachment. Zen talks about nonattachment, but it's not a simple matter. When your ego gets wrapped up with your desires, they become delusions. You need to keep this in mind in trying to understand the meaning of *muku doku*, "No merit"—Bodhidharma's first teaching in China.

Emperor Butei was probably rather confused by Bodhidharma's "No merit," and so he went on to ask a second question of a more scholarly nature: "Is there such a thing as the holy satori enlightenment of Buddhism?" Bodhidharma responded, "*Kakunen musho*." This is another phrase with which it is important to be careful. The first word, *kakunen*, means "vast emptiness," and refers to a perfectly blue sky without a single cloud in it. The second word, *musho*, which literally means "not holy," is the most important part of the phrase. *Mu* in *musho* is again negative. But we must interpret its meaning with great care. Bodhidharma wasn't simply saying there's nothing holy. He intended to communicate that real holiness transcends both holy and not holy. His teaching was concerned with transcending dualism. So his first teaching was about nonattachment and his second was about transcending dualistic oppositions.

The emperor basically gave up with Bodhidharma's "Vast emptiness, nothing holy," so his third question revealed that he was a bit upset. "You just told me there's nothing holy," the emperor said, "but what about you? Aren't you an enlightened and, therefore, holy person?" Bodhidharma answered, "*Fushiki*," which literally means "I don't know." The *fu* of *fushiki* is negative. By saying "I don't know,"

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Bodhidharma offered three teachings upon his arrival in China. The first was “No merit,” *muku doku*, the second was “Vast emptiness, nothing holy,” *kakunen musho*, and the third was “I don’t know,” *fushiki*. These three teachings contain Zen’s essence—nonattachment and transcending dualism. These are two of the pillars of Zen Buddhism. Unfortunately Emperor Butei was not able to understand Bodhidharma’s teaching, nor could many Chinese Buddhist monks of the time understand it. What’s more, a group of extreme Chinese monks felt that Bodhidharma’s weird brand of Buddhism was dangerous and they tried to poison him. There is a painting of Bodhidharma in which he’s missing the teeth on one side of his mouth. This is to show that he lost his teeth as a result of being poisoned. He knew if he remained in Ryo, he’d be killed, so he fled north crossing the Yangtze River. Bodhidharma’s flight north is a popular motif in paintings in which he’s shown crossing the Yangtze on a single leaf. Some people imagine Bodhidharma had special powers that allowed him to cross in such a fashion, but the leaf is just a symbolic way to show that he crossed in a tiny boat.

Bodhidharma continued to the north and arrived at Shaolin Temple. Shaolin Temple is where kung fu originated. Bodhidharma, concluding that China was not yet ready for Zen, took up residence in a nearby cave, where he began to meditate. Fortunately, one day a Chinese monk named Eka came to him. If Eka hadn’t come to see him, the development of Zen in China would have been delayed. Eka became a monk very early in his life. He was a diligent student and traveled throughout China in pursuit of spiritual training, but never attained enlightenment. Finally he came to Bodhidharma and asked to be his disciple. Bodhidharma initially refused to answer. According to the record, this took place in January, the coldest time of the

year in this part of China. Eka’s wish to become Bodhidharma’s disciple was so strong that he stood outside Bodhidharma’s cave all night long. There was a snowstorm that night.

The following morning Bodhidharma asked, “You’ve been standing out in the snow all night. What do you want?”

“Out of great compassion, please teach me, Master!” Eka replied.

“The practice of Zen is not such an easy matter,” Bodhidharma said. “If you really want to get enlightenment, you must be willing to sacrifice your life.”

Chinese monks in those days used to carry small knives. At Bodhidharma’s reply, Eka pulled out his knife, cut off his left arm, and placed it before Bodhidharma to show he was willing to sacrifice his life to practice. Bodhidharma accepted him as a disciple.

“I’ve been practicing for so long,” Eka said, “but my mind is still not at ease. Please put my mind at ease.”

“Bring me your mind and I’ll put it at ease.” Bodhidharma replied.

Eventually, Eka came up with a good response, but it’s not clear how long it took Eka to come up with it when you read the record. Having completed Zen training myself, I know that Eka’s response was not easily arrived at. Eka’s eventual response was, “I’ve been looking for my mind, but in the end, I couldn’t find it.” The first Chinese character of Eka’s response means “in the end,” which makes it clear that he had been working on the matter for a very long time before he realized it was impossible to grasp the mind. The mind is not to be found anywhere. The expression “I cannot find my mind” is very important.

Hearing Eka’s response, Bodhidharma said, “There, your mind is at ease.”

The whole Buddhist religion began with Shakyamuni Buddha’s awakening. The essence of his awakening was that nothing has permanent self-nature, that everything is empty. Eka’s answer, “I cannot

find my mind," expresses the very same understanding in a Chinese way, more concretely and less philosophically. You cannot find your mind. It's impossible because the mind is empty. Simply realizing this fact in itself puts the mind at ease.

Realizing this emptiness is called "the mind of Mu." When your mind is empty, you can't find it anywhere. When your mind is empty, you can interact with life freely. You can receive whatever comes your way with complete freedom. Thus the mind of Mu is also a free mind: each moment is creative and fresh. Because your mind is empty, you can't find it, and realizing the mind that can't be found is itself satori enlightenment. When Eka said he couldn't find his mind, he'd awakened to this. When Bodhidharma said "Your mind is at ease," he was acknowledging Eka's enlightenment.

The Sixth Ancestor: Buddhism Becomes Zen

To say that there is a pure body of satori enlightenment or a mind resembling a polished mirror reveals a final attachment from the perspective of Mu.

IT WAS THE SIXTH PATRIARCH, Eno, who really made Buddhism into Chinese Zen. Eno was born in the region of Canton in southern China. It's fair to say that Eno was a religious genius. As a layman, he had to work to support his mother, which he did by chopping wood and selling firewood. From the beginning, Eno was possessed of a kind of Buddhist spark. One day while he was out selling firewood, he heard a monk chanting the *Diamond Sutra*. Of course, being an illiterate layperson, Eno didn't recognize it as the *Diamond Sutra*. An important line appears in the sutra that states that the original mind shines forth when there's nowhere to dwell. Eno was deeply moved when he heard the monk chant this line.

He asked the monk what he was reciting, and the monk told him it was the *Diamond Sutra*. When asked where he had learned the sutra, the monk replied that he learned it in a place near the Yangtze River where the Fifth Patriarch was teaching Zen. Eno immediately wanted to meet the Fifth Patriarch. First he provided means for his mother to live, then he set out to meet the Fifth Patriarch. Eno's religious mind is apparent in the way he thought about and cared

ZEN BRIDGE

The Zen Teachings of
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"When the Heart Is Clear, the Hundred Tasks Go Well"

Calligraphy by Keido Fukushima