

Dharma talk 4/17/22 Ancestor Bodhidharma

Good morning

Today is easter and war

started to write about the mountain and waters sutra but somehow I ended up with a talk about bodhidharma. No idea how that happens.

Today I would like to talk about something we have not talked about much. Avalokiteshvara, Shariputra, Manjushri, Mahaprajapati. The list of foreign sounding names is quite long. Especially people who may be relatively new to our Zen practice may be scratching their heads during our service. I know that this was the case for me. Some of the names also show up in several koans. Often koans are described as puzzles without solution, mind benders that push the mind to a point of giving up on a conceptual response. Others describe koans as family stories of our zen ancestors.

So today I will talk about the history, and two koans about one of the most famous Zen ancestors : Bodhidharma, also known as the 28<sup>th</sup> ancestor or our 1<sup>st</sup> ancestor in China. I will also touch briefly on his most well-known teaching called “the outline of Practice”. Many Zen practitioners have heard these lines before,

*A special transmission outside the scriptures.  
not founded upon words and letters.  
Pointing directly to the human mind.  
Seeing into one's nature and attaining Buddhahood.*

So, yes, that was bodhidharma. Talking about his life and the history of the time, his birthplace, and so on, it will sound like there is great certainty. However, there are scholars who are equally sure that this historical Bodhidharma never existed. I will leave it up to you to decide for yourself. Writing this talk, I leaned heavily on Red Pines book. I had to leave out many theories and facts to keep the talk somewhat coherent.

Bodhidharma was born around the year 440 in Kanchi. the capital of the southern Indian kingdom of Pallava. He was the 3<sup>rd</sup> son of a king and was a Brahman. When he was young he converted to Buddhism. Later, his father invited Prajnatarra who taught him the dharma. Prajnatarra asked his student to go to China. Often I hear it said that he brought Buddhism to China which simply is not true. There were more than 8000 temples and more than 110000 clergy. In the south Buddhism was mostly confined to the educated elite but in the north Buddhism was spreading quickly through the general population.

Bodhidharma arrived in southern China around 475. This is where the famous encounter with emperor Wu happened. This story is famous to this day. It is the first koan of the Blue Cliff Record and the second case in the Book of serenity. Let me read it to you.

#### Case 1 of the Blue Cliff Record

*Emperor Wu of Liang asked the great master Bodhidharma, 1*

*"What is the highest meaning of the holy truths?"<sup>2</sup>*

*Bodhidharma said, "Empty, without holiness."<sup>3</sup>*

*The Emperor said, "Who is facing me?"<sup>4</sup>*

*Bodhidharma replied, "I don't know."<sup>5</sup>*

*The Emperor did not understand.<sup>6</sup>*

*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?"<sup>9</sup>*

*The Emperor said, "I don't know."<sup>8</sup>*

*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).<sup>12</sup> Master Chih told him, "Your majesty, don't say that you will send someone to fetch him back.<sup>13</sup> Even if everyone in the whole country were to go after him, he still wouldn't return."<sup>14</sup>*

Bodhidharma traveled for a few years and finally settled in northern China at Shaolin temple. In Dogen's Fukanzazengi we chant "Need I mention the Buddha, who was possessed of inborn knowledge? The influence of his six years of upright sitting is noticeable still. Or Bodhidharma's transmission of the mind-seal? The fame of his nine years of wall-sitting is celebrated to this day. Since this was the case with the saints of old, how can we today dispense with negotiation of the way?" Yes, Bodhidharma sat in his cave for 9 years and he became known as "the indian who stares at a wall." To the Chinese, he must have looked foreign with his blue eyes and (perhaps) red beard.

There is a story that in his seventh year he fell asleep. He cut off his eyelids and where he dropped them tea plants sprouted to keep practitioners awake forever after. It is said that he sat for so long that his buttocks rotted away. I do not know what he found in those 9 years, but he became well known locally.

Now, if you have ever run across Shaolin in the movies, Im almost sure it wan't about Zen history but kung fu. To this day Shaolin temple is famous for its martial arts training. Some legends describe Bodhidharma as being disturbed by the poor physical and mental shape of the Shaolin monks. So he taught them techniques to improve their physical condition and he taught them meditation.[43] He is said to have taught a series of external exercises called the

Eighteen Arhat Hands[43] and an internal practice called the Sinew Metamorphosis Classic.[44] In addition, after his departure from the temple, two manuscripts by Bodhidharma were said to be discovered inside the temple. Copies and translations of one of the documents still exist today.

Bodhidharma's teachings were recorded and written down. Copies from the seventh century were discovered in 1900 in the TunHuang caves. His best known sermon is 'Outline of Practice'. It is amazingly brief and terse – quite a step away from the flowery language of the Avatamsaka and Vimalakirti Sutras. And it is just a little bit too long for me to read all of it to you. But if you have a chance hunt it down on the internet and read and study it. I wanted to give you a taste of it so I left out sections.

### *Outline of Practice*

*MANY roads lead to the Path, but basically there are only two: reason and practice. To enter by reason means to realize the essence through instruction and to believe that all living things share the same true nature, which isn't apparent because it's shrouded by sensation and delusion. Those who turn from delusion back to reality, who meditate on walls, the absence of self and other, the oneness of mortal and sage, and who remain unmoved even by scriptures are in complete and unspoken agreement with reason. Without moving, without effort, they enter, we say, by reason.*

*To enter by practice refers to four all-inclusive practices: Suffering injustice, adapting to conditions, seeking nothing, and practicing the Dharma. SKIP*

*Second, adapting to conditions. As mortals, we're ruled by conditions, not by ourselves. All the suffering and joy we experience depend on conditions. If we should be blessed by some great reward, such as fame or fortune, it's the fruit of a seed planted by us in the past. When conditions change, it ends. Why delight In Its existence? But while success and failure depend on conditions, the mind neither waxes nor wanes. Those who remain unmoved by the wind of joy silently follow the Path.*

*Third, seeking nothing. People of this world are deluded. They're always longing for something-always, in a word, seeking. But the wise wake up. They choose reason over custom. They fix their minds on the sublime and let their bodies change with the seasons. All phenomena are empty. They contain nothing worth desiring. Calamity forever alternates with Prosperity! To dwell in the three realms is to dwell in a burning house. To have a body is to suffer. Does anyone with a body know peace? Those who understand this detach themselves from all that exists and stop Imagining or seeking anything. The sutras say, "To seek is to suffer.*

*To seek nothing is bliss." When you seek nothing, you're on the Path. Fourth, practicing the Dharma.' The Dharma is the truth that all natures are pure. By this truth, all appearances are*

*empty. Defilement and attachment, subject and object don't exist. ... Those wise enough to believe and understand these truths are bound to practice according to the Dharma. And since that which is real includes nothing worth begrudging, they give their body, life, and property in charity, without regret, without the vanity of giver, gift, or recipient, and without bias or attachment.*

*Thus, through their own practice they're able to help others and glorify the Way of Enlightenment. And as with charity, they also practice the other virtues. But while practicing the six virtues to eliminate delusion, they practice nothing at all. This is what's meant by practicing the Dharma.*

Bodhidharma asked, "Can each of you say something to demonstrate your understanding?"

Dao Fu stepped forward and said, "It is not bound by words and phrases, nor is it separate from words and phrases. This is the function of the Tao."

Bodhidharma: "You have attained my skin."

The nun Zong Chi stepped up and said, "It is like a glorious glimpse of the realm of Akshobhya Buddha. Seen once, it need not be seen again."

Bodhidharma; "You have attained my flesh."

Dao Yu said, "The four elements are all empty. The five skandhas are without actual existence. Not a single dharma can be grasped."

Bodhidharma: "You have attained my bones."

Finally, Huike came forth, bowed deeply in silence and stood up straight.

Bodhidharma said, "You have attained my marrow."

Bodhidharma passed on the symbolic robe and bowl of dharma succession to Dazu Huike and, some texts claim, a copy of the Lañkāvatāra Sūtra.

The standard reading of this koan is that Huike got it and the others didn't. Dogen, however, came up with a different understanding. Throughout Zen history this story is read as if Huike were the winner of the contest, that his expression is the best and the others are somehow lesser. But Dogen is saying, *No! That's not right. Every expression of dharma is the true and full expression of dharma. Every expression is different. Everyone is true and full. We all take our position wherever it happens to be, and there is nothing lacking in any expression.*

We all have our expression. It may look like there is a hierarchy of expression. Somebody coming to this talk might think: *Oh, he's talking; he's the teacher. He's expressing the dharma. Everyone else is listening.* But that actually wouldn't be the case. We're all sitting here expressing the dharma together. Some of us are priests or lay people, with many years of experience. Some of us brand new. Each one of us in our various positions fully expresses the dharma. That is what happens when we practice. And even if we don't practice we are still doing it.

Bodhidharma had only a few disciples, including laypeople, both men and women. His was the first teaching of the Dhyana school outside of India. It was in China, Korea and Japan that this school would flourish. In China the Dhyana school became Chan and in Japan it became Zen. In Transmission of Light rivalries are described. 2 local precept masters hated him. They tried to poison him 6 times. They threw rocks at him knocking out his front teeth.

Daoxuan provides information concerning Bodhidharma's death. Bodhidharma, he writes, died at the banks of the Luo River, where he was interred by his disciple Dazu Huike, possibly in a cave. According to Daoxuan's chronology, Bodhidharma's death must have occurred prior to 534, the date of the Northern Wei's fall. Furthermore, citing the shore of the Luo River as the place of death might possibly suggest that Bodhidharma died in the mass executions at Heyin in 528. Supporting this possibility is a report in the Chinese Buddhist canon stating that a Buddhist monk was among the victims at Héyīn. On the other hand, three years later, an official of one of the later Wei kingdoms, claims to have encountered Bodhidharma, who told him he was returning to India. He had a staff on his shoulder from which hung a single sandal. Bodhidharma predicted the death of Song Yun's ruler, a prediction which was borne out upon the latter's return. Bodhidharma's tomb was then opened, and only a single sandal was found inside.

The Zen Teachings of Bodhidharma translated by Red Pine  
Transmission of Light, Zen in the Art of Enlightenment by Zen Master Keizan, translated by  
Thomas Cleary