

**CASE 1**

**Bodhidharma's  
"Vast and void"**



By Yamada Kōun

*Instruction:*

When you see smoke on the other side of the mountain, you immediately know there is fire. When you see horns on the other side of the fence, you know straightaway that there is an ox. To understand three when one is raised, to judge a minute weight at one glance – this is the everyday food and drink of a patch-robed monk. When he has cut off the myriad streams, he appears in the east and disappears in the west, opposes or complies in all directions, gives or takes away with perfect freedom. At such time, just say, who lives and acts like this? Observe well Setchō's entangling vines.

*Case:*

Emperor Bu of Ryō asked Great Master Bodhidharma, "What is the ultimate meaning of the holy truth?" Bodhidharma said, "Vast and void, no holiness." The emperor said, "Who are you facing me?" Bodhidharma said, "I don't know." The emperor did not understand. Finally, Bodhidharma crossed the Yangtze River and came to the Kingdom of Gi.

Later the emperor asked Shikō about it. Shikō said, "Does your Majesty know who that man is?" The emperor said, "I don't know." Shikō said, "He is the Mahasattva Avalokitesvara transmitting the Seal of the Buddha's mind." The emperor regretted what had happened and wanted to send an emissary to invite Bodhidharma back. Shikō said, "Your Majesty, don't say to send an emissary to fetch him back. Even if all the people in the land were to go after him, he would not return."

*Verse:*

The holy truth, vast and void:

How could you ever discern the clearest point?

"Who are you facing me?" His answer was, "I don't know."

Thereupon he secretly crossed the Yangtze River.

**How could the growth of thorns and brambles be avoided?  
Even if all the people in the land went after him, he would not come back.  
He yearns after him in vain for thousands and tens of thousands of years.  
Give up yearning for him!  
What limit is there to the pure wind circling the earth?  
Looking around to the right and to the left, the master said,  
"Is the patriarch here?"  
"Yes," he answered himself.  
"Call him here! I will make him wash this old monk's feet."**

*On the Instruction:*

**When you see smoke on the other side of the mountain, you immediately know there is fire. When you see horns on the other side of the fence you know straightaway there is an ox.** This indicates a very clever, quick movement of apprehension, just like the saying, "hearing one, understanding ten".

**To understand three when one is raised.** This means, for example, to take a look at one corner of a square box and understand the structure of the whole.

**To judge a minute weight at one glance.** This means to be able to measure a very tiny weight without using a scale, just by taking a short look. These four phrases express how quick the activities of a sharp mind are.

**This is the everyday food and drink of a patch-robed monk.** The "patch-robed monk" means a Zen monk. All this is nothing special to him, it does not surprise a true Zen monk. How a well trained Zen monk is – this is shown in the following phrases.

**When he has cut off the myriad streams, he appears in the east and disappears in the west, opposes or complies in all directions, gives or takes away with perfect freedom.** The "myriad streams" means delusions, which are now cut straight off. Their roots must be directly cut off; brooding it over in your head never helps. To cut off the roots means to cut off the sources from which all delusions, common ways of thinking, untrue ideas, concepts, thoughts etc., spring forth. Then, such a mind appears in the east and disappears in the west. Complete freedom, thorough flexibility. He "appears" not only "in the east and disappears in the west," but also appears in the west and disappears in the east, appears in the north and disappears in the south, appears in the south and disappears in the north, appears in the center and disappears on the edge, appears on the edge and disappears in the center – these six ways of saying it form one set. In our text, the first one of the six is used to express how freely a Zen master handles students who come to ask dharma questions.

**Whether circumstances are adverse or benign, he is master of the moment.** We are all human beings living in a complex world, and things do not always go the way we want them to. But a true Zen person is someone who can act with total freedom no matter what the

circumstances are.

**He gives or takes away with complete freedom.** "Give" refers to the times when the Zen master praises the student or allows him or her their say. "Take away" refers to those times when the master reprovcs the student and says, "No good!" This is also expressed in Zen texts as killing and giving life [*sekkatsu*]. The true Zen master is completely free to do both. Needless to say, "killing" is not physical killing. It is killing in the sense of depriving the student of his or her cherished concepts. It is helping that person to "die" to the small self. And in the same moment he or she is brought to great life [*daikatsu-genjō*]. Zen practice is a matter of being absorbed so completely in zazen that you forget yourself. When you have truly forgotten yourself, there is no consciousness of a self. This is "killing" in the Zen sense. When you die the great death [*daishi-ichiban*], you also come to the great life of satori. But to do so, you must reach the point where all consciousness of self disappears.

Another term used in Zen writings to refer to the same process is gathering in and letting out [*shūhō*]. The truly outstanding Zen master exhibits total freedom in depriving students of their concepts and bringing them to true life in enlightenment. For a real Zen person, says the Instruction, this is the easiest thing in the world.

**At such time, just say, who lives and acts like this? Observe well Setchō's entangling vines.** Who can act with the freedom just described? Is there indeed such a person? Yes there is, and for proof we are invited to look at Setchō's "entangling vines". When this expression appears in Zen texts, it usually refers to delusive thoughts. In the present case, however, it means words and refers to the koan itself. A koan is something which "winds itself around" us, so to speak; it demands fervent practice if we are to penetrate it, as anyone who has worked on koans will agree. Let us now examine the koan which Setchō has selected for our perusal and observe the truly free activity of an accomplished master.

This concludes the instruction. However, we are still left with the question, "Where does the activity come from which cuts off the myriad streams, appears in the east and disappears in the west, the activity which is completely free in good and bad circumstances?" Such activity does not appear except as the result of a Zen experience. The *Shōdōka* ("Song of Realizing the way"), of Great Master Yōka<sup>1</sup> includes the following passage:

*To directly cut off the root-source is the seal of the Buddha.*

*I cannot bother to pluck leaves and search for branches.*

It is you who must cut off the roots. The only way to do so is to sit and forget yourself. But most people are still dallying on the edges of delusion. Those engaged in intellectual pursuits must be especially cautious. The temptation is all too great to approach things academically. Should this tendency persist, you miss the chance to come into direct contact with the matter itself. What could be more regrettable? Thinking and philosophizing are truly of no use when it comes to realizing your true self. Why? Because the one who is thinking is the fact

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<sup>1</sup> 675?-713.

itself. The one who is thinking can never be objectified; it is the thinking subject itself. For explanation's sake we can think of this in terms of an airplane and the vapor trail it leaves behind. Consider the vapor trail to be the object and the airplane to be the subject. The subject flies through the air while continually spewing the object from the rear. I can consider myself. I can even consider my self considering, and so on ad infinitum. It is just like the airplane which endlessly leaves a vapor trail behind it as it flies. But the one who is considering is not the vapor trail. That one can never be objectified. Take an intellectual approach and you inevitably end up with a dual structure. Hisamatsu Shin'ichi refers to Zen practice as the way of the absolute subject. It is the way of the subject which can never be objectified. Many of the great Zen personages of the past started out on a path of intellectual or philosophical studies of Buddhist doctrine and then came to an impasse when they realized that living experience was the only true way. Their numbers include people like the above-mentioned Great Master Yōka as well as Master Rinzai and Master Tokusan. Such people show us that no matter how far we may have advanced in intellectual pursuits, it is still necessary to sit and realize. Let me quote again from the *Shōdōka*:

*From my youth I piled studies,  
I searched in sastras and looked in sutras.  
Incessantly I classified terms and forms;  
I entered the sea to count the sands – all in vain.  
Then the Tathagata rebuked me kindly:  
"What gain is there in counting other people's treasure?"  
Thus I learned that I had been wearing myself out uselessly,  
For years I had been dust blown in the wind.*

***On the Case:***

**Emperor Bu of Ryō asked Great Master Bodhidharma.** Bodhidharma is the 28th patriarch after Shakyamuni. He is said to have been the third son of King Kōshi in southern India. He was the dharma successor to the 27th patriarch, the Reverend Hannya Tara. It seems that he was with his master for quite a long time even after the completion of his enlightenment. When Bodhidharma formally renounced the world [*shukke*] and received the dharma from Hannya Tara, the Reverend Master told his disciple, "Although you have attained the dharma, stay in southern India for a while. Sixty-seven years after my death, however, you will depart for China to spread the dharma there." Bodhidharma is, therefore, supposed to have been almost 120 years old when he came to China. He is said to have attained an age of about 150 when he died. At any rate, he must have been quite an old man. According to legend it took him three years to sail over to China, since his tiny ship was battered several times by heavy storms. He first landed in Kōshū, and met Emperor Bu of Ryō, who was governing the region at that time. So the story dates back about 1400 or 1500 years. The

emperor was quite well versed in Buddhist teachings. It is reported that he wore monk's clothes and preached on the *Hôkô Hannya Sutra*. Since the emperor was devoted to Buddhism, Bodhidharma went to see him, evidently hoping to open up the emperor's eyes by whatever means necessary.

**"What is the ultimate meaning of holy reality?"** The ultimate meaning of holy reality means the ultimate truth of Buddhism. "Profane reality" [*zokutei*] means the truth of the phenomenal world, "true reality" [*shintei*] means the truth of the world of essence, "holy reality" [*shôtei*] is that which transcends these two. So, the emperor asked about the last and ultimate truth.

**Bodhidharma said, "Vast and void, no holiness."** This is the main point of the koan. The word "holy" has, like other similar words such as "saint" or "sacred," connotations of being worthy and respectful. But according to Bodhidharma, "it is like the autumn sky without a cloud, completely clear. No such thing as 'holiness' exists." Thus he is presenting the real fact as "Vast and void, no holiness." But the emperor Bu is still adhering to the idea of "holiness." He esteems Bodhidharma as a highly venerable man, as a saint.

**The emperor said, "Who are you, facing me?"** Who are you then, sir?  
**Bodhidharma said, "I don't know." The emperor did not match him.** The emperor did not understand what Bodhidharma said. The two did not match each other. So Bodhidharma gave up.

**Finally, Bodhidharma crossed the Yangtze River and came to the kingdom of Gi.** He left the southern part of the land, crossed the Yangtze River and went over to the northern area.

**Later the emperor asked Shikô about it.** The emperor told what had happened to Shikô and asked him about it. Now this Shikô<sup>2</sup> was not an easy fellow to deal with. One legend about him goes like this: One day people heard a crying voice, like that of a baby, in a bird's nest up a tree. So they brought down the nest, and inside they found a baby with claws like those of a hawk. – It seems that Shikô was a man who had attained the experience of "falling off of body and soul" already at his birth. There is also an interesting story about him together with a famous layman named Fu-Daishi [the Great One Fu]. Fu was asked by the emperor Bu of Ryô to make a lecture on the Diamond Sutra. "Daishi then went up to the rostrum, hit the pulpit once, and came down." He simply hit the desk once – WHACK! – and came back. "The emperor Bu was dumb-founded." The emperor did not understand the compassionate action of Fu-Daishi. So "Shikô said, 'Daishi has finished his lecture, your Majesty.'" In our koan too, the same Shikô is asked by the emperor what kind of a man Bodhidharma is.

**Shikô said, "Does your Majesty know who that man is?"** Do you know, your Majesty,

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<sup>2</sup> A monk greatly trusted by Emperor Bu. His real name was Hôshi or Hoshi (418/425-514), he had long hair, walked barefoot in the city, wielding a long staff with a pair of scissors and a mirror on it. Mysterious as he was, he is said to have been able to appear in many different forms.

who Bodhidharma really is? **The emperor said, "I don't know."** Then Shikô, moved by compassion for the emperor, takes advantage of the visit by Bodhidharma in order to awaken the emperor:

**Shikô said, "He is the Mahasattva Avalokitesvara transmitting the Seal of the Buddha's mind."** He is the incarnation of Kannon, transmitting the true substance of Shakyamuni's enlightenment.

**The emperor regretted what had happened and wanted to send an emissary to invite Bodhidharma back.** The emperor realized he had made a mistake. If that man was such a great person, I shouldn't have let him go away. I'm sorry for what I did, let somebody go after him and ask him to come back.

Then **Shikô said, "Your Majesty, don't say to send an emissary to fetch him back. Even if all the people in the land were to go after him, he would not return."** Even if all the people in the country of Ryô went to get him back, he would never come back. But this makes the emperor Bu all the more regretful. It is said that he thereupon composed a poem, "Yearning after him in vain for thousands and tens of thousands of years ...," and had it carved in stone. In reality, Bodhidharma never goes away nor comes back. Not only Bodhidharma, but our true nature is like this. It does not get born, it does not die, it does not go anywhere – this is how our true nature is. Bodhidharma went to the land of Gi, but only formally and externally. The true essence knows no going or coming. The real fact is as immense as the whole universe. How could it ever "go away" or "come back"?

*On the Verse:*

**Holy reality, vast and void.** Not even a speck of cloud is in sight. Nowhere exists such things as "holiness" or "Buddha".

**How could you ever discern the clearest point?** "The clearest point" means the self-evident fact. That which is simply there. Why can't you see the thing itself which is simply there? The one who wants to see it is the "it" itself, so how could you ever see "it"?

**The emperor said, "Who are you, facing me?" Bodhidharma's answer was, "I don't know."** In Zen we speak about the "time-place-circumstances" [*ji-sho-i*]. Everything must be in accord with its own time, place and circumstances. Since the partner in the dialogue is an emperor, a type of response proper to that situation is needed. The same is true also when you come to dokusan.

**Thereupon he secretly crossed the Yangtze River,** because this meeting with the emperor had been fruitless.

**How could the growth of thorns and brambles be avoided?** Bodhidharma went over to the land of Gi and "faced the wall," sitting for nine years. This was, however, the beginning of all our troubles, like enlightenment, koans and so on. "If you had done nothing and just been quiet, you could have manifested the essence in its purest form. But look what

happened! You, Bodhidharma, are responsible for all that!" – the phrase seems to suggest such a nuance.

**Even if all the people in the land went after him, he would not come back.** Even if all the people in the country chased after him to fetch him back, he would not return – since there is nothing !

**He** (the emperor) **yearns after him in vain for thousands and tens of thousands of years.** Our own life is very similar to this. **Give up yearning! What limit is there to the pure wind circling the earth?** A pleasant wind is blowing over the earth. Is it the autumn wind? It could be the spring wind. What on earth is it? Is it the same as Bodhidharma or different? If you have the eye to see, you can see. Give up your yearning to bring Bodhidharma back. Where is the real fact? The rain, the clouds – everything in the phenomenal world is the complete manifestation of the essential world. Please savor well this endlessly pure wind.

**Looking around to right and left, the master said** – the "master" means Master Setchô, for here speaks another monk who inserted this – **Is the patriarch here?** I wonder if Bodhidharma is here. No one seems to have responded.

**"Yes," he answered himself.** Setchô himself answered, "Oh yes, there's one". **"Call him here! I will make him wash this old monk's feet."** Everybody believes that Bodhidharma is a very great man who came from India to China. Call him then, I will have him wash my feet. I believe this makes it clear who the true Bodhidharma is.