

Excerpts on Bodhidharma

Blue Cliff Record Case 1: The Highest Meaning of the Holy Truths, Talk 1

November 17, 1979 Dharma Talk by Dainin Katagiri Roshi

... Let me read the main subject:

Emperor Wu of Liang asked the great master [Bodhidharma](#), "What is the highest meaning of the holy truths?" Bodhidharma said, "Empty, without holiness." The Emperor said, "Who is facing me?" Bodhidharma replied, "I don't know." The Emperor did not understand. 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?" The Emperor said, "I don't know." 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). Master Chih told him, "Your majesty, don't say that you will send someone to fetch him back. Even if everyone in the whole country were to go after him, he still wouldn't return."

(From [The Blue Cliff Record](#) translated by Thomas Cleary.)

Blue Cliff Record Case 1: The Highest Meaning of the Holy Truths, Talk 2

November 18, 1979 Dharma Talk by Dainin Katagiri Roshi

0:00

Katagiri Roshi: I read the main subject of Case 1 already yesterday. This is a very famous story in [Zen Buddhism](#), so I think most of you know it pretty well.

Emperor Wu of Liang asked the great master [Bodhidharma](#), “What is the highest meaning of the holy truths?” Bodhidharma said, “Empty, without holiness.” The Emperor said, “Who is facing me?” Bodhidharma replied, “I don’t know.” The Emperor did not understand. After this Bodhidharma crossed the Yangtse River and came to the kingdom of Wei.

In the history of Bodhidharma, it is said that he went to China in about 520 CE. Of course there are several different opinions about the definite year when Bodhidharma went to China, but anyway, about 520 he went to China to teach [Buddhism](#). So that was the first time which the seed of Zen Buddhism was planted in China. That’s why this event was very important for Zen Buddhism. That’s why if you read the Zen koans, the Zen monks always bring up the question, “What is the meaning of Bodhidharma coming to China to teach Zen Buddhism?” What for? Why did Bodhidharma go to China and teach? For many, many years, this question is very important in Zen Buddhism. Many monks discuss this. It looks like the same question in Christianity, for instance, “Why is it that God is incarnated as a human named Jesus?” Same question. I don’t want to explain this today. But, that’s why in Zen Buddhism, this is very important for a Zen teacher.

Anyway, Bodhidharma went to China in about 520, and met with Emperor Wu. This story is the discussion between Emperor Wu and Bodhidharma. The commentary by [Engo Zenji](#) says:

When Bodhidharma first met Emperor Wu, the Emperor asked, “I have built temples and ordained monks; what merit is there in this?” Bodhidharma said, “There is no merit.” He immediately doused the Emperor with dirty water. If you can penetrate this statement, “there is no merit,” you can meet Bodhidharma personally. Now tell me, why is there no merit at all in building temples and ordaining monks? Where does the meaning of this lie?

While this is a very natural question, his natural question has a lot of meaning; it’s natural, but it’s a deep question. If you practice [zazen](#), most of you expect something particular: merit, or reward, or progress in practice. This is very natural. So what if Bodhidharma says, “No merit”? Why was Bodhidharma a “liar”? Because if you practice zazen, some of you can find merit or progress in practice; if it is true, you cannot say, “There is no merit.” There is merit; so why does Bodhidharma say “no merit”? That’s the question Engo Zen Master asks in his commentary: why?

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28:32

You know I’ve told you before in my lectures, the inscription on Rilke’s tombstone says:

Rose. Oh!
Pure contradiction.
Under layers of eyelids,

there is peaceful sleep, with joy.
No one touches.

This is the inscription on Rilke's tombstone. [*He repeats it.*]

This is my translation; do you understand this?

[Someone says "no." Laughter.]

(*Transcriber's Note:* It took many listenings to get the words above, and it still might not be 100% right. A typical translation online reads, "Rose, oh pure contradiction, joy of being no one's sleep under so many lids.")

[There is some discussion about the words.]

[Much more laughter.]

This is language, okay? [*Laughter.*] You don't understand, but *I* understand! [*Laughter.*] So that is my individual understanding, okay? But I understand pretty well. [*Laughter.*] But using my pronunciation, you don't understand.

...

What I want to tell you is: it says "Rose" and next, "Oh!" The rose is really the being that you get right now, that you can see through the six consciousnesses. So that's why he built up just, "Rose." But next, "Oh!" means completely no words – because the rose blooms in reality from moment to moment, completely beyond human verbalization. Nothing to say. When language completely disappears, at that time you cannot say anything – just "Oh!" So, the language completely drops off, and then, at that time, you can see the really beautiful world, the beauty of existence. But you cannot say anything at all about the beauty of existence, because this is reality itself.

And then if you really want to explain this, you cannot stay there always, in the realm of the beauty of existence ... so finally you have to say something in words, coming from this silence. You have to say something, otherwise you cannot educate somebody.

So language must be dropped off, and finally language must come from silence again. That's why the inscription says, right after *Oh*, "Pure contradiction." This is a philosophical explanation. If you really want to explain *oh* as the beauty of existence, nothing to say, language drops off. And then language comes back again, explaining about this beauty of existence in terms of, you can say, pure contradiction. Or, in terms of poetry, you can say, "Under layers of eyelids, peaceful sleep with joy. No one touches." This is poetry.

But this is still an explanation, which is told in terms of poetry, in terms of language, in terms of philosophy. *Really*, if you really see the reality of the rose, everyone should experience this point when language drops off. At that time, nothing to say.

That's why when Bodhidharma first met Emperor Wu, the emperor asked, "I have built temples and ordained monks; what merit is there in this," Bodhidharma says, "There is no merit." The merit Emperor Wu understood is just the image of merit. Looking at his reality, looking at the image, coming from the image, coming from prepossession, coming from the conventional, coming from customs. But reality doesn't agree sometimes. So Bodhidharma saying "no merit" means to lead him to open his eyes, to look at the beauty of existence when language drops off completely.

That's why Bodhidharma said "no merit." But the Emperor didn't understand.

Diamond Sutra: Dharma / Not Dharma / Dharma

August 15, 1979 Dharma Talk by Dainin Katagiri Roshi

41:15

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Merit is two kinds of merit. Worldly merit: if you practice, you can experience something. That individual experience is a kind of merit, worldly merit. But real merit is completely no-merit, because you cannot attach to the individual experience of merit. Real merit is completely no-merit; no-merit is real merit. If you completely throw it away, give it to somebody, if your individual experience is given to the truth or universe again, at that time you can get *real* merit.

For instance, if you chant the sutra to the Buddha, this is practice. But through the practice we expect something from the practice, from ritual. By ritual, by chanting the sutra, can the merit of chanting the sutra reach to the Buddha's heart or not? Of course. But actually, all you have to do is, just chant the sutra. By chanting the sutra, very naturally you can experience something from ritual. But that experience is completely individual. I always tell you, there is no reason to attach to individual experience. Next, we have to put it aside. So practically, all you have to do is just continue to chant the sutra, in the presence of Buddha. Just practice *zazen*. That is *shikan zazen*, or *shikan* chanting. This is the meaning of Zen Buddhist ritual.

So, no merit. Always putting aside individual experience, whatever it is, and then [continuing to] chant – that is no-merit. But this no-merit is really merit, because you can deeply settle yourself in the middle of ritual. It's very stable. So sooner or later, you can touch the core of existence.

Blue Cliff Record Case 25: The Hermit of Lotus Flower Peak Holds Up His Staff, Talk 2

November 22, 1981 Dharma Talk by Dainin Katagiri Roshi

22:14

If your words don't startle the crowd, you fall into the streams of the commonplace.

Words coming up from very deep silence: that's full aliveness, when your life is fully alive day by day. Even though [you are] holding the suffering, the pain, [your life is] endlessly alive and "hopping along." People are really educated by those words.

I told you before: words should come not from your head, but from silence. Silence means the silent world behind you. Because the world we can see, the world of your life that I can see, that is just the front. But behind your life, there are lots of stories, long stories, which are silent, very silent. It's pretty hard to [explain], but this huge vastness of the world behind your life is really working. If a word is coming up not only from the front, but from the silence, that word is not just the word. So you shouldn't understand just the word, because behind the word there is a huge world. That's why the word is important for us.

Bodhidharma says, "Vastness and nothing holy." Those are simple words: when Emperor Wu asks, "What is the essence of Buddhism," Bodhidharma says, "Vastness and nothing holy." Actually we don't understand it, but they are very sharp, very wonderful words coming from Bodhidharma's silent world. That's why still, from generation to generation, even though we don't understand, still we have to think of it – or we are captured by thinking of it. So that is important for us.

So how can we get those [kind of] words? There is no particular pattern. Basically, all we have to do is just practice day by day. That is really planting a good seed day by day. And then planting the seed is what? Can you get some reward from planting the seed? Nothing. Planting the seed is planting the seed. Actually you cannot get a reward from it, because day by day it is changing, so the next moment, we don't know if that seed will grow or fruit. But planting the seed is planting the seed. And then, next moment, it becomes silent.

So this silence is really affecting your life. But usually we plant the seed and then expect something. And then we want to let the seed grow completely. If it doesn't grow, we're really disappointed. Of course we should take care of the seed you have planted, but nevertheless, we don't know what will happen, actually. So silently we have to accept

the seed which we have planted, and silently we have to take care of the seed which we have planted. That is important. And then very naturally, our life is deepened.

Blue Cliff Record Case 43: Tung Shan's No Cold or Heat, Talk 1

March 16, 1983 Dharma Talk by Dainin Katagiri Roshi

1:30

Ten thousand ages abide by the phrase that determines heaven and earth.

From century after century, the phrases given by the buddhas and ancestors really penetrate the core of human being, not only explaining the surface of the human world, but the whole universe. So that's why even a simple phrase, a simple [statement], is handed down from generation to generation, and is very worthy of contemplating.

For instance, the very famous statement [from this famous story]:

When Bodhidharma went to China to teach Buddhism, first of all he met Emperor Wu. Emperor Wu asked Bodhidharma, "I have built lots of Buddhist temples and educated Buddhist monks and nuns. What is the merit?" And Bodhidharma said, "No merit."

Emperor Wu didn't understand *no merit*, so he continued to [wonder], "If Buddhist teaching is no merit, why do we study Buddhist teaching?" It didn't make sense to Emperor Wu, so he asked, "What is the essence of Buddha's teaching?" Bodhidharma said, "Vastness; nothing." The vastness of no holiness, and the vastness of nothing.

This statement was very impressive, so although [Emperor Wu] didn't understand, he felt something. So he continued [to ask]: "If there is nothing, and the essence of Buddhism is vastness of existence – if so, who are you?" Who is this little guy in front of Emperor Wu? And Bodhidharma said, "I don't know." Because even Bodhidharma is completely nothing holy, just vastness of existence.

That *I don't know* is not the usual meaning of "I don't know" that you think. That *I don't know* is that he knows pretty well, but still Buddha's teaching is completely beyond the intellectual sense or intellectual explanation.

So that is a very simple statement: "Nothing holy; just vastness." But this is a very impressive statement. So from generation to generation, we still have to continue to think about this. It has been handed down from generation to generation because it is not merely words, it comes from Bodhidharma's true heart. He really touches the core of existence.

The core of existence is really silent – but pretty active. It's very vast, because it is always embracing the whole thing. But according to human speculation, we think that is kind of contradictory, because [existence is] embracing everything in peace and harmony. So that's why it's vast, nothing holy; no discrimination there. (*Transcriber's Note: These last two sentences were difficult to understand.*)

So [the pointer says], "Ten thousand ages abide by the phrase that determines heaven and earth." What is the human world, what are human beings? What are the trees and the birds, the skies, heaven, earth? What is the beginning of the world? What is the end of the world? This simple phrase completely [extends] to heaven and earth.

Mindfulness – Talk 1

March 21, 1984 Dharma Talk by Dainin Katagiri Roshi

1 - 32:56

In zazen we practice facing the wall. According to Bodhidharma, wall meditation means observation of the wall, looking at the wall. Looking at the wall doesn't mean *you* look at the wall. The wall is emptiness. The wall is the source of existence; there is nothing there. So doing zazen, facing the wall, means abiding firmly in zazen, right-now-right-here – and then, what can you experience? This is emptiness, nothing. But nothing doesn't mean nothing, because simultaneously *vipassana* means you can touch very deeply the source of the human phenomenal world. That's why in the *Nirvana Sutra* it says, "If you want to see suchness, the truth of the human world, you have to see it through meditation, zazen." That's why doing zazen is very important for us.

And the contemplation of the body: I told you, in this case the body is both the body and the mind, in the modern sense. Then the human body means the human body, and nutrition, and also human activities, and spiritual life. So you have to observe the human body, including nutrition and activities, spiritual life. All are connected.

So what is the human body? We don't know what it is; you cannot pin it down. *Nothing to say* means completely your body is emptiness. It's vast. Finally, it is the entire universe, that's why we say "the entire universe". And "the ten directions": The ten directions means the spatial dimensions and also the dimension in time. So your body is connected with all sentient beings which exist in space and time. That is your human body. So that's why you cannot pin down what is your human body. At that time, that body is called Buddha's body. Beyond purity or impurity, we say Buddha body. Or technically, we say dharma body: *dharmakāya*. *Dharmakāya* is completely beyond your speculation. Anyway, your body is *dharmakāya*.