



As I approach my 70th birthday, which we're marking this year on Bodhidharma Day, I ask myself, "Has my life's work been in accord with Buddha's teachings?" I know that too many times, old karmic patterns have interfered with my ability to serve as a vessel of Dharma. I know my virtue is far from what it should be. I also know that this examination is not a matter of wallowing in self-recrimination. Rather, it must serve as great motivation. So, once again, I resolve to deepen my commitment to this endless process of transformation from selfishness to generosity of spirit, from laziness to diligence, from clinging to unconditional giving.

Often we hear the phrase, "This practice requires a daring mind." It is said that Bodhidharma cut off his eyelids so he wouldn't fall asleep during sitting. This may be apocryphal, but it points to the need to keep our eyes open, awake to the wonder of this moment, and simultaneously, aware of the suffering within and around us, so that we can attend to it appropriately.

It also points to the ways in which we set limits in our own practice, and to our ability to respond. As many of us have experienced during sesshin, when we start feeling pain, our first instinct is to seek some measure of comfort, attempting to adjust our posture inconspicuously, or trying to distract ourselves. But that never works; quite the contrary.

Going for the comfort zone is a great obstacle. It's not just a matter of limiting our ability to be with what is, no matter what; it directly impinges upon those around us. Directing our energies toward protecting our own little sphere of reference, no wonder we feel tight, stressed out, oppressed, fearful.

What would happen if we sat down and said, as Buddha Shakyamuni said, as many of our Dharma ancestors said, "That's it. I'm not getting up until I break through this congested, self-protective condition; until I finally experience true freedom." To have this kind of daring mind is essential.

When the distraught Eka implored Bodhidharma to take him on as a student, and to pacify his mind, Bodhidharma answered:

"The subtle and supreme teachings of the Buddhas can be pursued only by endless assiduity, doing what is hard to do and bearing what is hard to bear, continuing the practice even for kalpas; how can one of little virtue and much self-conceit dream of achieving it? It will end only in fruitless labor."

To enter into a practice of endless assiduity means to give up everything—all our preferences, our cherished hopes for a better relationship or a healthier body or a more satisfying job, all our self-improvement projects, our imagined goals and dreams of attaining some wondrous spiritual gain that will make us all better.

The problem is, most of us come to this practice with some idea of getting something. We may not believe we'll get enlightened, but we have some gaining idea, inchoate as it may be. We may shout MU, but we continue to think we must get something rather than nothing!

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Rinzai asks us, "What is it that you yourselves lack?" What do we gain from our practice? Nothing at all. What do we lose? Everything. All our unnecessary accretions; whatever it is we think we need. How can we add a thing? It's all here. With each inhalation, each exhalation, the universe is manifesting perfectly. This is Bodhidharma's "direct pointing to the human heart-mind."

When Emperor Wu challenged Bodhidharma, "What is the most holy principle of Buddhism?" Bodhidharma responded, "Vast emptiness, nothing holy." Hearing this, what does our inner Emperor Wu say? "Wait a minute! Nothing? How about something holy? How about a little peace of mind?"

Is this the pacification Eka was seeking? When he stood in the doorway and was refused entrance and came back again and again, crying, "Please, I beg you, pacify my mind," was he asking for some small amelioration? No! He was not seeking transitory comfort, otherwise he would have gone to sit by a nice charcoal brazier instead of standing in the snow, let alone cutting his arm off. But he stood there, begging, "Please, I implore you, pacify my mind!" And finally he cut off his arm, because he saw deeply into his real pain, his burning question, "What am I doing with my life?"

This is honest recognition. Cutting off his arm was the physical gesture symbolizing that existential pain. For us, too, acknowledging the difficulty we are in is the first step.

Unless we recognize our own dis-ease, we can listen to all the teachings over and over, but they fall on deaf ears. There has to be intense yearning—for what? "What is the meaning of Bodhidharma coming from the West?" What is the meaning of our own lives? What are we here for, or, as Gauguin put it, "Who are we, Where do we come from, Where are we going?" It's more than a mental construct. It's an urgent condition of mind. And when we are in this urgent condition, then we are open to the teachings in whatever form they take.

Bodhidharma told Eka at last, "Bring me your mind and I will pacify it for you." Eka then said, "I have searched everywhere for my mind, and I cannot find it." Bodhidharma replied, "There, I have pacified your mind." It's not something, somewhere, to be found. Realizing this, what more need we seek? We can't find pacified mind because we are it. Remember that childhood game of Hide and Seek? You're It!

On Oct. 26, at Dai Bosatsu Zendo, we will begin Harvest Sesshin. We will honor Bodhidharma's injunction: "The subtle and supreme teachings of the Buddhas can be pursued only by endless assiduity, doing what is hard to do and bearing what is hard to bear, continuing the practice even for kalpas." Sesshin is the best opportunity to develop a daring mind, and the fierce compassion that unfolds from it, so that we can mean what we say when we chant, "Shujo Mu Hen Sei Gan Do. However innumerable beings are, I vow to save them all."

See you on the cushion!

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read "Rinze".