

CASE 2

**Bodhidharma's
"Completely Empty"**

By Yamada Kôun



Instruction:

Benka presented the jewel three times and still did not avoid meeting with punishment. When a jewel that shines in the night is thrown before people, it's rare that they do not reach for their swords. No sudden host for the sudden guest. It is a temporary aid, but not a true aid. Having no use for rare gems and unusual treasures, I hold up the head of a dead cat. Look!

Case:

Emperor Bu of Ryo asked the Great Master Bodhidharma, "What is the ultimate meaning of the Holy Truth?" Bodhidharma said, "Completely empty, 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 went to Shôrin where he sat facing the wall for nine years.

Verse:

**Completely empty, no holiness.
The seekers of the way are far from him.
Winning, he swings the axe without harming the nose.
Losing, he does not turn his head on dropping the vase.
Sitting alone coldly in Shôrin Temple,
He silently presents the authentic command.
On a clear night in autumn, the moon turns its frosty wheel.
The Milky Way is bright, and the Great Dipper tips its handle in the night.
The robe and bowl were passed on continuously to the descendants.
From this it becomes medicine and sickness for people and heavenly beings.**

When I compare the *Blue Cliff Record* and the *Book of Equanimity*, I consider the *Blue Cliff Record* to be superior in terms of literary style and the poetry. From the Zen standpoint, however, I have the feeling that the *Book of Equanimity* has more savor. If we compare these

various koan collections in terms of the lifetime of a person, you could say that the *Gateless Gate* corresponds to the period from about 25 to 40 or 45 years old. It is still green. The *Blue Cliff Record* is the period from about 45 to 55 or 60 years old. This is the period of the "the best years" where the Zen practitioners are at the height of their powers. The Book of Equanimity corresponds to the period from 60 years to 70 or 80 years, a state of consciousness seasoned with age.

The *Book of Equanimity* often includes references to traditional Chinese stories and the like. I once heard from Yasutani Roshi that his own teacher, Harada Roshi, had found this very troublesome.

The Instruction at the beginning is written to provide prior knowledge while looking at the main case and helping our understanding. Since it has its sights set on the main case, it is of course examining things from the essential point of view. I think it might be easier to understand if I first examine the Main Case, and then examine the Instruction to see how Elder Banshō examines that main case. With that in mind, let's proceed now directly to the main case.

On the Case:

Emperor Bu of Ryo asked the Great Master Bodhidharma. At the time of the Emperor Bu of Ryô (464-549 AD, reign period: 502-549 AD) there were two dynasties in China, which were separated by the Yangtze River. This period is known as the Period of the Northern and Southern Dynasties in Asian history. The kingdom to the south was the Sung and that to the north was the Wei. After that, the Southern Sung went into decline and became the Southern Sui Dynasty. The Emperor Bu who appears in this koan, conquered the Southern Sui and assumed the throne himself, changing the name of the kingdom to Liang. His reign period lasted about 50 years. Although originally an adherent of Taoism, he found Buddhism to be superior and discarded Taoism in favor of Buddhism, holding a great ceremony on the occasion. After that he built large temples and ordained many monks, bestowing them with their credentials. He also had a temple ordination platform built in the palace and he himself received the precepts as a monk: a total of 250 strict precepts reserved for authentic monks. He even applied fire to his body before the Buddha in a rite of self-denial. The emperor also put on a monk's robe and delivered lectures on the sutras. As you can see, he was a very devout Buddhist.

The Emperor Bu assumed that he was exerting himself to the utmost on behalf of Buddhism and that his merit was no doubt great. His son, the prince, is said to have carried out the task of dividing the *Diamond Sutra* into 32 chapters. As this shows, both father and son were most devout Buddhists.

When Bodhidharma first met the Emperor Bu of Ryo, the emperor told him the various things he had done on behalf of Buddhism and how he would often don a monk's robe himself to present lectures on the sutra. He was wondering what merit he had accumulated as a result. Bodhidharma said, "No merit at all."

Although we might assume that merit accrues for doing various good works, from the

standpoint of the great ocean of our essence, that merit is equal to one or two drops of water in that great ocean. In that sense, there is truly no merit. The merit has already been provided fully from the very start. The emperor was not aware of this fact and was thinking only of the various things of form he had done and wondering what his merit was. This is because he was not aware of the true world. In an effort to bring the emperor to a realization of that world, Bodhidharma said, "No merit at all!" It was like having muddy water thrown over his head. The exchange in today's koan then follows.

Emperor Bu of Ryô asked the Great Master Bodhidharma, **"What is the ultimate meaning of the Holy Truth?"** **Bodhidharma said, "Completely empty, no holiness."** The "ultimate meaning of the holy truth" means the ultimate truth, the highest truth. The emperor wanted to know what that is. There is a three-way division into the "profane truth," the "authentic truth," and the "holy truth." The "profane truth" is the truth of the phenomenal world, which is the world of form when we consider it in terms of the statement "form is emptiness, emptiness is form." The "authentic truth" is the world of not one thing, the world of emptiness. Although we make a division into phenomena and emptiness, they are actually one. This world where they are one is known as "the holy truth." With his question, the emperor is asking what the ultimate truth is. In reply, Bodhidharma said, "Completely empty, no holiness." It is like the sky in autumn, without a single cloud, nothing at all. But the sky still has the color blue, so there is the saying, "even the blue sky must receive a blow." Even that color blue must disappear. He was presenting the ultimate truth in his answer. The emperor was very surprised. He had been assuming that Bodhidharma before him was a holy man. But Bodhidharma tells him that there is no holiness.

The Emperor said, "Who are you facing me?" **Bodhidharma said, "I don't know."** Everyone puts on airs of understanding, but this is knowledge that is acquired later. We instinctively strive to interpret things and come to an understanding. But there are questions and problems that just cannot be solved with the mind alone. Here is one of them: "'Who are you facing me?' Bodhidharma said, 'I don't know.'" If someone asks you who you are, you really don't know. Who is this person with this face? If you don't know, then you should clearly admit it. It is the hubris of the human being to attempt to use his head to come up with an answer. You could call it intellectual hubris. It is the false pride of the human being to assume that he can understand everything with his head. But when you don't know, you really don't know. Why is this world here like this? I don't know. Some might say that God made it, and that is all right. People assume that they know what God is. But when you get right down to it, you don't know. Then it becomes a matter of faith. Please savor this matter of not knowing.

The Emperor did not understand. Finally Bodhidharma crossed the Yangtze River and went to Shôrin where he sat facing the wall for nine years. The emperor could not understand what Bodhidharma was saying, in spite of himself. Bodhidharma realized that the emperor's affinity to the dharma was still lacking and gave up the case as hopeless. He then crossed the Yangtze River and went to Shôrin [Chin.: *Shaolin*] Temple, where he sat before the wall in zazen for nine years. Let us return now to the

Instruction.

On the Instruction:

Benka presented the jewel three times and still did not avoid meeting with punishment. What is this line talking about? To sum it up, it is a matter of "casting pearls before swine." No matter how wonderful and precious something might be, if you give it to someone who does not know the value, it is worthless.

There is a story behind this statement. It is found in the book by the Chinese philosopher Kambishi [Chin.: *Han Fei-tzu*]. A man named Benka found a stone in a valley in the mountains. It was actually an unpolished stone that, if it were to be polished, would produce an outstanding gem. Knowing it to be a wonderful gem, Benka presented it to King Rei of the Kingdom of So. The king had the stone examined by a gem specialist. That specialist said it was an ordinary stone. Believing Benka to be a no-good liar, the king had him captured and cut the tendon on his left foot. When King Bu later assumed the throne, Benka presented the stone a second time, telling him it was a wonderful stone. Once again, the king had the stone examined by an expert who proclaimed it was a fake. This time, Benka had the tendon on his right foot cut. Then King Bun assumed the throne. He heard that there was a man living in the mountains clutching a stone and weeping all the time. He had him brought to the court. He asked him if he was crying because he had the tendons on his feet cut. He learned that this was not the reason the man was crying, it was because no one realized what a wonderful stone he had. King Bun had the stone polished, and lo and behold, a most wonderful gem was produced. If we apply this story to the main case in today's koan, it means that persons who haven't understood will not appreciate what is being said. "Bodhidharma said, 'Completely empty. No holiness.'" – this is a wonderful gem thrown out in front of the emperor, but he did not understand.

When a jewel that shines in the night is thrown before people, it's rare that they do not reach for their swords. One day a man came across a wounded snake that was suffering. Taking pity on the creature, he helped it. As a sign of gratitude, the snake visited the man in the night, throwing a stone in the room. Not knowing that it was a gem, the man thought that a spirit had suddenly appeared and reached for his sword. But it was actually a gem that shone in the dark. This means that, when a jewel that shines in the night is thrown before them, there are not many people who will not mistakenly think it is something fearful and reach for their swords. But then it turns out to be a very precious stone. In other words, no matter how precious something might be, if people do not know it, it is worthless.

No unexpected host for the unexpected guest. An unexpected guest is someone who suddenly appears at the door without advance warning. You have to respond on the spot to the situation, whatever it is. The sudden guest is Bodhidharma. But Emperor Bu of Ryô simply went on at length about what he had done: building many temples and giving many people permission to become monks and nuns. Such talk did not match Bodhidharma's state of consciousness. His counterpart was not an agile host. He was unable to adapt to the circumstances.

It is a temporary aid, but not a true aid. He is only good at skillful means but

has nothing to offer when it comes to the real thing.

Having no use for rare gems and unusual treasures, I hold up the head of a dead cat. Look! Bodhidharma has no use for unusual gems or treasures. The expression "the head of a dead cat" goes back to an anecdote of Master Sôzan. A monk met him and asked him what the most precious thing in the world was. Sôzan said, "The head of a dead cat." The monk wanted to know why that was so precious. "Because no one can put a price on it," was the reply. The author says he is now producing that head of a dead cat and tells us to look carefully. Having already examined the Main Case, we turn now to the Verse.

On the Verse:

With his Verse, Wanshi Zenji has composed a poem as an aid in appreciating the koan. Also included in the *Book of Equanimity* are the commentaries of Elder Banshō. In that sense, the book has the same structure as the *Blue Cliff Record*. It's a shame that there is not enough time in these teishos to examine the commentaries. Let us examine the individual lines of the Verse.

Completely empty, no holiness. The words of Bodhidharma have produced the essential world as it is. Not a speck of cloud obscuring the view. This is the world of Mu.

The seekers of the way are far from him. This says that such seekers are not of the same mind as Bodhidharma.

Winning, he swings the axe without harming the nose. This story appears in the Taoist text Sôshi [Chin.: *Chuang-tzu*]. Long ago, in the kingdom of Tei, a man had some white mud on his nose that he asked a master axman to remove. The axman swung his axe and removed the speck of white mud without leaving a scratch. The one with the white mud on his nose was completely calm and did not move an inch. He did not even realize that the mud had been removed from his nose. Bodhidharma's statement, "completely empty, no holiness" removes all delusive thoughts. But the emperor did not realize this. Although he had been dealt a lethal blow, he did not realize it.

Losing, he does not turn his head on dropping the vase. This story is found in the *Latter Book of Han*. A man named Mōbin lived on a great plain. One day, when he was carrying a wonderful vase, he slipped and the vase broke. Mōbin did not even look back but kept on walking. Observing this, a man named Kaku Rinshū called to him and said, "Didn't you drop a vase?" Hearing this, Mōbin looked at the pieces of the vase and said, "It has no value now." Usually rather than not looking back, people would want try to gather together the broken pieces, even though they know it has no worth. Such an attitude like Mōbin's is hard to come by. Feeling that the other man had promise, Kaku Rinshū became the patron of Mōbin and raised him up.

This part of the Verse is referring to the section in the koan where Bodhidharma crosses the Yangtze River and goes to Shōrin [Chin.: *Shaolin*] Temple to sit before the wall for nine years. Like the man in the story, he did not turn back. Although he had come close to the imperial palace, he left immediately without any regrets.

Sitting alone coldly in Shōrin Temple, he silently presents the authentic command. This refers to the practice of Bodhidharma. He is completely alone. The

expression "sitting coldly" [*reiza*] is very good. There is no trace of heated desire to do anything. He is sitting there in silence. This truly presents the essential world.

On a clear night in autumn, the moon turns its frosty wheel. The Milky Way is bright, and the Great Dipper tips its handle in the night. This is also a poetic expression of Bodhidharma's sitting alone at Shôrin Temple. On a bright night in autumn, a pure white moon gives off its light. There is not a trace of feverish excitement. The only thing to do is to read it carefully and appreciate it.

The robe and bowl were passed on continuously to the descendants. From this it becomes medicine and sickness for people and heavenly beings. This means that the medicine becomes poison. Because Bodhidharma passed on the dharma, the statements such as "completely empty, no holiness" and "I don't know" are medicine to wake us up from illusion. But if they are not used in the right way, they will become a patina of illusions on top of the original illusion, with ideas of "Zen" or "Buddhism." We can take this as Wanshi Zenji's irony or, better said, his warning.