

BOOK OF SERENITY  
2 BODHIDHARMA'S "EMPTINESS"

INTRODUCTION

A man presented a jewel three times but didn't escape punishment. When a luminous jewel is thrown to anyone, few do not draw their sword. For an impromptu guest there is no impromptu host; what's appropriate provisionally is not appropriate for the real. If unusual treasures and rare jewels cannot be put to use, I'll bring out the head of a dead cat—look!

CASE

**Emperor Wu of Liang asked Great Teacher Bodhidharma, "What is the highest meaning of the holy truths?" Bodhidharma said, "Empty—there's no holy." The emperor said, "Who are you facing me?" Bodhidharma said, "Don't know."**

**The emperor didn't understand. Bodhidharma subsequently crossed the Yangtse River, came to Shaolin, and faced a wall for nine years.**

COMMENTARY

Prajnatara once instructed Bodhidharma, our great teacher, "Sixty-seven years after my death you will go to China to present the medicine of the great teaching, showing it directly to those of excellent faculties; be care-ful not to go too fast and wither under the sun. And when you get there, don't stay in the South—there they only like fabricated merit and don't see the inner reality of buddhahood, so even if you go there, you shouldn't stay too long." And after all it turned out that he did travel to Liang (in the South), cross over into Wei (in the North), and remained unmoving for nine years.

In recent times, when Cizhou's robe and teaching were bequested to Renshan, Renshan said, "I am not such a man." Cizhou said, "Not being such a man, you do not afflict 'him'." Because of his deep sense of gratitude for the milk of the true teaching, Renshan raised his downcast eyes and accepted. Cizhou went on to say, "Now you are thus; most important, don't appear in the world too readily—if you rush ahead and burst out flippantly, you'll surely get stuck en route." This, Prajnatara's three instructions, and Bodhidharma's nine years of sitting, are all the same situation. Zhaxi's verse says,

*Willing to endure the autumn frost  
So the deep savor of the teaching will last,  
Even though caught alive,  
After all he is not lavishly praised.*

This is suitable as an admonition for those in the future. A genuine way-farer knows for himself the time and season when he

appears.

Even though Emperor Wu did not comprehend, still he made a point with his question that can be dug into. Even now everywhere when they open the hall and strike the gavel they still say, "Assembly of dragons and elephants at the seat of the Dharma, behold the highest truth." But if it is the ultimate truth, can it after all be seen? Does it admit Emperor Wu's questions or Bodhidharma's answers?

I say, leaving aside the highest meaning for the moment, what do you want with the holy truths? Tianhuang said, "Just end profane feelings— there is no special holy understanding." The Heroic March Scripture says, "If you create an understanding of holiness, you will succumb to all errors." Just this Bodhidharma, saying "Empty—there's no holy," undeniably has expert skill and a discerning eye in the light of a spark or flash of lightning. Emperor Wu stayed there dribbling like a fool, not backing off; he went on to ask, "Who are you who reply to me?" For Emperor Wu's part, this was still a good intention, but he hardly realized that for Bodhidharma it was like being spit in the face. Bodhidharma couldn't help but again offer an "I don't know." Already this is a case of 'the beauty of the towers easily fades away; how could you add frost to snow?' Bodhidharma saw his eyes moving and immediately shifted his body and traveled another road. The ancients sometimes came forth, sometimes stayed put, some-times were silent, sometimes spoke; all were doing buddha-work.

Later Emperor Wu after all 'thought about a superior man after he had gone' and personally wrote an epitaph for him, which said,

*I saw him without seeing,  
Met him without meeting him—  
Now as of old  
I regret and lament this.*

Even though His Majesty was just an ordinary man, he presumed to consider Bodhidharma his teacher in retrospect. After Emperor Wu was covered with dust and Bodhidharma had returned to the West, since then no one has brought up the highest meaning of the truth; fortunately there is Tiantong, who brings it out for the people. His verse says,

VERSE

**Empty—nothing holy:  
The approach is far off.  
Succeeding, he swings the axe without injuring the tiouse;  
Failing, he drops the pitcher without looking back.  
Still and silent, coolly he sat at Shaolin:  
In silence he completely brought up the true imperative.  
The clear moon of autumn turns its frosty disc;**

The Milky Way thin, the Dipper hangs down its handle in the night.

In succession the robe and bowl have been imparted to descendants;

From this humans and divinities have made medicine and disease.

#### COMMENTARY

"Emptiness, nothing holy—the approach is far off." The latter expression comes from Zhuangzi—"Very far off, not near to human sense." At that time the patriarch Bodhidharma may have been a bit lacking in expedient technique, but it is hardly realized that unless the medicine stuns you it won't cure the disease. At first he immediately brought down a thunderous hand, but now he has already gone this way to take a rest; therefore 'succeeding, he swings the axe without harming the nose. As Zhuangzi was attending a funeral procession, as they passed the grave of Huisi he turned and said to his followers, "As Ying Ren was plastering a wall he splashed a bit on his nose, a spot as big as a fly wing; he had Jiang Shi cut it off. Jiang Shi swung his axe, creating a breeze, and cut it off with a whoosh—closing his eyes, letting his hand swing freely, he cut away the whole spot without injuring Ying Ren's nose. Ying Ren stood there without flinching. Since the death of these people, I have no one capable of being my disciples."

"Failing, he drops the pitcher without looking back." Meng Min of the latter Han dynasty stayed in Taiyuan during his travels; once as he was carrying a pitcher, it fell to the ground, but he went on without looking back. Guo Linzong saw this and asked him the meaning. Meng Min replied, "The pitcher is already broken; what's the use of looking back?" Linzong considered him unusual because of this, and urged him to travel for study. The meaning is that if Emperor Wu had spontaneously acquiesced, Bodhidharma would never have cramped himself to go along with another; if Emperor Wu was baffled, Bodhidharma could brush out his sleeves and immediately leave without regret.

In the golden palace he showed his facelessness, managing to say a half; hanging his mouth up on the wall at Shaolin was only eighty percent. This is like "The clear moon of autumn turns its frosty disc." This indirectly makes use of Fayan's poem, "Everywhere I go, the frosty night's moon falls as it may into the valleys ahead," bringing to light the incomparable Way of ultimate truth.

"The Milky Way thin, the Dipper hangs down its handle in the night." In a talk in the teaching hall, Tiantong has said, "In the spherical dot shines the uttermost subtlety; where wisdom is effortless, knowledge remains. When clinging thought is cleared away nothing else is left; in the middle of the night the Dipper handle hangs down in the Milky Way." These two verses are like a mute serving as a messenger—he points it out to people, but can't

express it. How could there be master to disciple transmission, mutual quelling of medicine and disease? This misses the point all the more. How is it possible to bring up the true imperative in its entirety?

*How much tortoise hair thread is used for the flowers in the sky?  
A stone woman uselessly raises the poison tieedle.*

Tsk!

ADDED SAYINGS: CASE

**Emperor Wu asked Bodhidharma**-^— Even getting up at the crack of dawn, he never made a profit at the market.

**"What is the highest meaning of the holy truths?"**—For the time being turn to the secondary to ask.

**"Empty, no holy."**—Splits his guts and gouges out his heart.

**"Who are you facing me?"**—He finds tusks in his nostrils.

**"Don't know."**—'If you see jowls from behind his head

**The Emperor didn't understand**—A square peg doesn't fit in a round hole.

**Bodhidharma crossed the river, came to Shaolin, and faced the wall for nine years**—A house with no surplus goods doesn't prosper.

ADDED SAYINGS: VERSE

*Empty, nothing holy*—Each time you drink water it hits your throat.

*The approach is far off*—Honest words are better than a red face. Succeeding, he swings the axe without injuring the nose—In an expert's hands expertise is flaunted.

*Failing, he drops the pitcher without looking back*—What's already gone isn't blamed.

*Still and silent, coolly he sat at Shaolin*—Old, he doesn't rest his mind.

*In silence he completely brought up the true imperative*—Still he speaks himself of military devices.

*The clear moon of autumn turns its frosty disc*—set your eyes on high and look.

*The Milky Way thin, the Dipper hangs down its handle in the night*—Who dares to take hold of it?

*In succession the robe and bowl have been imparted to descendants*—Don't think falsely.

*From this humans and divinities have made medicine and disease*—When an act of heaven has already passed, the emissary should know.