

Bodhidharma Sat Facing the Wall
3 March 2003

(by Albert Low)

Bodhidharma sat facing the wall. The second Patriarch, having cut off his arm, stood there in the snow.

He said, "Your disciple's mind has no peace as yet. I beg the teacher to give it rest."

Bodhidharma replied, "Bring your mind here and I will give it rest. »

The Patriarch said, "I have searched for that mind, and finally see that it is unattainable. »

Bodhidharma said, "Then I have put it to rest."

Commentary

The broken toothed old foreigner crossed the sea from a hundred thousand miles away. This was raising waves when there is no wind. Bodhidharma had only one disciple and even he had only one arm. Well! well!

Verse

Coming from the west and directly pointing.
All the truth comes from that.
The jungle of monks being all at sixes and sevens
Comes from these two chaps.

Hui-Ko, the second Patriarch was an intellectual and he suffered from the blight of many intellectuals. He was very arrogant. He had heard about Bodhidharma, who was sitting in a cave facing the wall, and had decided to go to him get his teaching. As a teacher one often encounters this attitude. People will say that they have done some Zen, or have read a few books on Zen, and they would like to come along and discuss it. There is no please or whatever. Quite likely Hui-Ko went to Bodhidharma with that kind of attitude. So long as one is going to « get » something, whether from practice or from a teacher one already has barriers and blocks to surmount.

Bodhidharma refused to have anything to do with him. But something about Bodhidharma must have made Hui-Ko wonder. So he stood outside the cave waiting for Bodhidharma to acknowledge him. As he stood there snow began to fall. But still he stood outside the cave. Eventually the snow reached to his knees. Again he asked Bodhidharma for his teaching and Bodhidharma turned on him and said, "The

incomparable truth of the Buddhas can only be attained by immeasurable striving, practicing what cannot be practiced and bearing the unbearable. How can you, with your little virtue, little wisdom, and with your easy and self-conceited mind, dare to aspire to attain to true teaching? It is only so much labor lost.”

Practicing what cannot be practiced. What is this practice that cannot be practiced? This is what we are constantly told to do. Anything that you do, any practice that you have, is no good, it is so much labor lost. When a monk went to Rinzai and was about to ask him for his teaching Rinzai hit him. “Why are you hitting me,” complained the monk, “I have not even opened my mouth yet.” “What is the good of waiting until you have opened your mouth?” growled Rinzai. Anything you do, even to think of opening your mouth is too much. Now practice! Practice what cannot be practiced and bear the unbearable. The unbearable is not the pain in the legs or the wandering mind. The unbearable is to realize that we’re not something, we’re not this puffed up, important person that in our heart of hearts we believe we are.

Bodhidharma makes a direct assault on Hui K’o. There is no ‘compassion’ there, no «powder and rouge» words, to use an expression of Harada roshi; no « little Jesus meek and mild » approach. He is tearing down Hui-Ko’s enemy.

Then, the koan says, Hui-Ko cuts off his arm. Of course the possibility of doing this is very remote. It would make an awful mess. But we must not take too literally what the koan says. Certainly, Hui-Ko took extreme measures. We have in English an expression, ‘I would give my right arm for that’ meaning that I prize it very, very highly ; I am prepared to give my right arm for it. The right arm, at one time, was the arm of power, the sword arm, the arm with which you would defend yourself. To give one’s right arm would be to put oneself into a powerless situation or powerless position. This is how we must understand what is happening to Hui-Ko here.

Bodhidharma had crashed through his arrogance.

Then Hui K’o said. “Your disciple’s mind has no peace as yet. I beg the teacher to give it rest.”

What a beautiful word is the word peace. It has an aura of gentleness, of tenderness, of lightness.

Peace! Peace on earth! A search that we humans have made throughout the ages. Right now about a million people are marching in Washington demanding peace. In Montreal about a hundred and fifty thousand people marched through the streets demanding peace.

After a recent workshop a woman became very incensed with me saying how disappointed she was in the workshop. She said what I had said was interesting enough but how could I avoid the issue, the threat of war in Iraq that was hanging over us at the time. What did I have to offer except sitting in front of a wall watching the breath? In times like these she said one turns to spiritual leaders to give guidance and support. What was I offering but an escape?

She too was demanding I give her peace.

But we cannot demand peace. We cannot look upon it as our right. Everyone wants peace. During the Vietnam war people marched in demonstration and, of course, those demonstrations were as useless as these more recent ones were. Nothing came of them except perhaps to help America lose the war. They did not bring peace! They brought a capitulation. During those demonstrations in Washington in the 70's Pierre Trudeau looked out of the window, he was at a meeting with the president of the U.S.A. at the time, and he remarked, «Don't those people down there realize that we want peace as well?»

Why do I say these demonstrations and demands are useless? First let's be honest, the idea that we can have eternal peace is a pipe dream. I have given reasons for saying this in my book, *Creating Consciousness*.

But of more practical importance is that if we are to take part in marches for peace, we should at least have spent a few years finding the source of our own war and struggling, at least to some extent, to bring about some kind of internal reconciliation, some kind of peace within ourselves. Otherwise, all that we are doing is projecting out our own war in this demand for peace. War between nations is the sum total of all of our own individual wars which has spun out of control. A war is human suffering made manifest, not in the victims of the war but in the fact of the war. And our suffering, as Buddha said, comes from desire.

People say that all that Bush wants is to protect the oil in the Middle East, to ensure that the US has control of the oil there. And they say this with fury and declare that this is terrible that he should do such a thing. But they arrived at the demonstration in which they express their fury, in a car. Are they prepared to give up their car? Are they prepared to give up travelling by bus or plane, to give up their furnace and air-conditioning for this peace?

Voltaire, that great activist, probably the greatest, was a pamphleteer who used wit, satire to try to bring about social change. He was, among other things, against the excesses of the Church. He said that in reality all theological disputes ultimately come down to one question: should the shirt be worn inside or outside the trousers. But after a lifetime of activism he came to the conclusion that what he should do was to cultivate his own backyard.

I am not saying that one should not join in peace marches if one feels there is any point in doing it. It depends on one's own political affiliation and faith in the democratic process. But let us dig our own backyard to start with. Let us really go at it and find some way in which we can extirpate these eternal conflicts in ourselves and which, willy nilly, we're constantly projecting on to others, even when we march for peace.

If one does truly want peace then one should be prepared to die. One should be prepared to die for that peace. I remember Gandhi somewhere at one time said that if one is going to engage in non-violence then one must be prepared to die in that

process. One should be like a soldier on the battlefield risking his life or her life in the same way. And he said if one is not prepared to do that then one must fight. And if one doesn't fight then one is a coward.

But the real fight is the fight to face the pain of our conflicts. It is the fight to release ourselves from the grip of the tyrant from which all our conflicts and pain arise, the fight in which we must die to be reborn.

Oscar Wilde said that sentimentality is wanting to enjoy an emotion without being prepared to pay for it. I've had, I don't know, half a dozen I suppose, e-mails from different teachers including one from the Buddhist Fellowship for Peace exhorting me to join in with meditations for peace, prayers for peace and so on. This seems to me to be cheap stuff, sentimentality. What do they think we do here every time we cross our legs, if it isn't a prayer for peace?

If every moment of our practice is not a prayer for peace, if we are not praying for peace when we sit then we are wasting our time. This struggle for peace is the eternal struggle. As Shibayama said, «You who have not spent sleepless nights in suffering and tears, who do not know the experience of being unable to swallow even a piece of bread -- the peace of God will never reach you. » This is the way we will find peace. Not in the world, but in ourselves. And if we find peace in ourselves, perhaps we can shed just a little, oh, so little, light on this troubled world. One more quote from Shibayama says, "I myself shall never forget the spiritual struggle I had in sheer darkness for nearly three years. I would declare that what is most important and invaluable in Zen training is this experience of dark nights that one goes through with one's whole being." Without having passed through the fire of the spiritual struggle, what use is there for special prayers for peace, special evenings of meditation? And if we have passed through the purgatorial fires, again, what use is there for those special demonstrations of our love for peace?

One of the finest examples of spiritual writing that I have come across is the following given by Bodhidharma.

« If a follower of the way falls into any kind of suffering or trial one should think and say thus:

"During countless past ages I have abandoned the root and gone after the branches, carried along on the restless, bitter waves of the sea of existence, and have, because of this, created endless occasions for hate, ill-will and wrong-doing. The harm done has been limitless. Although my present suffering may not be caused by any wrongdoing committed in this life, yet it is the fruit of my errors in a past existence that happens to ripen at this moment. It is not something which men or gods have given to me. Let me therefore take, patiently and sweetly, this bitter fruit of my own making without resentment or complaint against anyone or anything." When this way of thinking is awakened the mind responds spontaneously to the dictates of Reason, so that this can even help one make use of other people's hatred and so turn it into an occasion to advance toward the Tao. This is called "the rule of the repayment of debts. »

As Bodhidharma says, "During countless past ages I have (...) created endless occasions for hate, ill-will and wrong-doing. » At the beginning of each sesshin we chant the repentance gatha. This can be seen as a summary or condensation, you might say, of the fourteen reminders, and when we chant the gatha we are repenting our failure to have lived up to the fourteen reminders. « All evil actions committed by me since time immemorial, stemming from greed anger and ignorance arising from body speech and mind I now repent having committed." We recognize that we hurt others so thoughtlessly; we hurt them so easily. We are at a check out counter and the clerk does not go fast enough and so we snap, growl. Perhaps that person behind the counter there has heard some very bad news; perhaps that is why she is slower. But that does not matter.

We now have the phenomenon of road rage. Somebody cuts in front of us in a car and we are prepared to kill them. A man actually tried to kill me a little while ago on the road. Truly! It was touch and go as to whether we would have a terrible accident. I inadvertently, truly inadvertently, had prevented him from overtaking me because I was in the wrong lane. It was inadvertent but wrong nevertheless. He tried to kill me. We become angry and hurt someone. In their pain they turn on another who carries his resentment home and inflicts further pain there. And so the ripples spread out accumulating as they go, feeding back to their source and out again and the explosive mixture is brewed, waiting for the moment when war breaks out again.

As Bodhidharma says, "The harm done has been limitless. Although my present suffering may not be caused by any wrong-doing committed in this life, yet it is the fruit of my errors in a past existence which happens to ripen at this moment." Somebody once asked in his misery at what he was suffering, «What have I done to deserve this?» Someone else interjected, «Plenty! »

And then Bodhidharma says, and this is so important, "It is not something which men or gods have given to me." We suffer because we are human. In our suffering we lash out at others and so sow the seeds for more suffering. Bodhidharma gives the way to find peace: "Let me therefore take, patiently and sweetly, this bitter fruit of my own making" This is the formula for peace, not by waving placards, not chanting «Bush et Blair criminels de guerre» because, as he says, we must accept this bitter fruit "without resentment or complaint against anyone or anything."

Now, so often, let us admit, we cannot do this,. So often our anger just erupts. We just can't help it. But after the fact we can help it. All right so we have blown up. Afterwards any reasonable person feels remorse, regret. At that time, within that pain of remorse and sadness, we can pay our debt. By staying with the pain, with the remorse. One stays with the pain instead of blaming; instead of complaining "If they had not said that," or "If she had not done that" and so on. Or alternatively, instead of blaming oneself, of promising to do better in future, saying «I don't know what's the matter with me. I have been practicing for God knows how long. I must get hold of myself. In future ...» and all this kind of thing. All of this is just bluff, smoke, trying to avoid that pain, that remorse, that regret. But we must stay in the pain, in the middle of that furnace, that purgatorial

fire. Through those purgatorial fires alone will we find the peace that we seek. In this way we can make use of other people's and our own hatred, « and so turn it into an occasion to advance toward the Tao. » This, Bodhidharma calls, "the rule of the repayment of debts. »

Bodhidharma sets an extremely high standard for us if we really take what he says to heart.

People come to the Center and say that they want to come to awakening. This is not what we're about. We are here to pay off our debts. Of course, we all start off, every one of us, wanting the pearl of great price. Every one of us imagines what it will be like when others look up to us in awe, wonder, when we have that halo! But as we labor, and as we drag ourselves through the dust across the desert, through the dryness, with the sun beating down mercilessly day after day, our feet burning, nothing on the horizon to give us any kind of hope, we come to let go of the pipe dream and begin to see that something much deeper, much more profound than self glory is driving us on. We are now driven to find true peace.

I rarely talk about peace. Peace is one of those words that I am afraid of using. The word peace is like the word love. For a long time I was afraid of using it. I remember Joshu, who said, « Whenever I use the word Buddha I wash my mouth out for three days afterwards." Some of these words like love, peace God are like having treacle in your hair. You just can't get them out. They have been so used, so abused, sold so cheaply. Anyone can get a following if one sprinkles these and similar words around like confetti.

But even so we are looking for peace. We do seek peace. Remember those wonderful lines of Jesus. "My peace I now give to you. But not as others give, give I.» And then he speaks of his peace as the peace that passes all understanding. And this is the peace that we want. Not the peace that we can demand, not the peace that we can negotiate but the peace that is beyond all understanding.

Hui-Ko said, "Your disciple's mind has no peace as yet. I beg the teacher to give it rest." Bodhidharma replied, "Bring your mind here and I will give it rest." Again he is very direct, very forthright. Again, no 'powder and rouge' words. « Bring your mind and I will set it at rest. » And the Patriarch said, "I have searched for that mind, and finally see that it is unattainable."

The question, of course is, with which mind did he seek that mind and find it unattainable?

Perhaps we could just read a little now from Hui-Ko's teaching.

« The Hwa Yen says: "It is as vast as the universe, as ultimate as the void. But it is also like a light in a jar that cannot illuminate the outside." When learners rely on written and spoken words on the path, these are like a lamp in the wind: they cannot dispel darkness, and their flame dies away. But if learners sit in purity without concerns, it is

like a lamp in a closed room: it can dispel the darkness, and it illuminates things with clarity.

If you completely comprehend the purity of the mind-source, then all vows are fulfilled, all practices are completed, all is accomplished. You are no longer subject to states of being. For those who find this body of reality [dharmakaya], the numberless sentient beings are just one good person: the one person who has been there in accord with this through a million billion years. »

He says, « The Hwa Yen says, 'It is as vast as the universe, as ultimate as the void'. » What is as vast as the universe, as ultimate as the void? You can swallow the universe without leaving a drop left over. Even so he says, « But it is also like a light in a jar that cannot illuminate the outside.» 'It' cannot be expressed. It is like a light in a jar. When one comes home to oneself, one is completely dumb. There is nothing that one can say. It is not only unknowable, it is unspeakable, inconceivable. « Like a light in a jar that cannot illuminate the outside.» This is what you are! As vast as the universe, as ultimate as the void. This is not how you will be one day; it is not how you could be if only you would work a little harder. It is how you are right now!

He says, « When beginners rely on written and spoken words on the path, these are like a lamp in the wind. They cannot dispel darkness and their flame dies away.» One can read the truth many times, one can read it written by spiritual geniuses and be struck by how marvelous it is, how wonderfully it is said. But then it flickers and is gone. This is why it is said that five minutes zazen is worth a library of books.

He says, « But if beginners sit in purity, without concerns, it is like a lamp in a closed room. It can dispel the darkness and it illuminates things with clarity.» Now what does it illuminate? What are these 'things' that it illuminates? It is the whole world that is illuminated. But how can one say that and at the same time say, « It is like a light in a jar that cannot illuminate the outside»? But these are not contradictory statements. Does not Hakuin ask, « What is there outside us? What is there we lack? »

When you see into this then everything expresses the truth. Even to raise an eyebrow is the truth expressed in its fullest.

He goes on to say « If you can completely comprehend the purity of the mind source then all vows are fulfilled. All practices are completed. All is accomplished.»

Come home! This is all that is required. When I say come home, perhaps it is best to say come home to the truth that you are home already. This is why all the practices that we perform, all the techniques that we use, all the ways we follow are useless, because they all lead away from home. It is like a person standing at the North Pole. Whichever way he goes, he goes south. One really comes home when you know truly that anything that you do is no good but everything that you do is already it.

He says, « For those who find this Body of Reality, the numberless sentient beings are just one good person.» Buddha said, « When I came to awakening the whole world came to awakening.» We also say, « All beings without number I vow to liberate.” All living beings are the one Buddha. Each of us is Buddha, as Hakuin tells us, “From the beginning all beings are Buddha.” One Buddha. And that each of us is that one Buddha.

« For those who find the Body of Reality the numberless sentient beings are just one good person. The one person who has been there in accord with this through a million billion years. »