

# CHINESE ZEN MASTERS

A 2005-06 monthly lecture series by Ven. Jian Hu  
in the Stanford "Buddhism in the Modern World" Series

## **November 29: "Why Did Bodhidharma Come to the East?"**

Bodhidharma sailed from India to China, met the Chinese emperor, sat facing a wall for 9 years at the Shaolin Monastery, and initiated one of the most influential schools of thought in the world.

## **January 26: "The Illiterate Prodigy: The 6th Patriarch Hui Neng"**

Arguably the most influential Chinese Zen Master ever, Hui Neng received no formal education, yet revolutionized Chinese Zen. The 4th and 5th Patriarchs will also be discussed.

## **February 23: "One-Night Enlightenment: Important Masters of the 7th and 8th Generations"**

Masters Yongjia ("One-Night Enlightenment"), Shitou ("the Rock"), and Mazu ("The Horse That Tramples the World") further developed the energetic character of Chinese Zen.

## **March 30: "The First of the Five Houses of Zen: Linji (Rinzai)"**

The founding patriarchs of the Linji (Rinzai in Japanese) school often employed unconventional shock tactics, yet the records of their teachings are shining jewels of philosophy and literature.

## **April 27: "The Second of the Five Houses of Zen: Caodong (Soto)"**

Founders of the Caodong House (Jap. Soto) have extensive Taoist knowledge. This second most influential House of Zen presents the path to enlightenment with a more philosophical edge.

## **May 25: "The Last Three Houses of Zen: Guiyang, Yunmen and Fayan"**

Unfamiliar to most westerners, these masters are nevertheless remarkable and charismatic teachers that enriched the Chinese Zen tradition in their own ways.



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## Lecture 1: Why Did Bodhidharma Come to the East?

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### 1. The Origin of Chan (Zen)—A Flower and a Smile 世尊拈花，迦葉微笑

One day on the Spiritual Mountain (a.k.a. Vulture Peak), an assembly gathered to hear the Buddha's Dharma talk. However, on that occasion, Buddha simply held up a flower offered by the Brahma King and gazed at the assembly, without saying a word. No one understood the meaning except Mahakashyapa, who broke into a smile. Thereupon the Buddha said, "I have the true Eye of the Dharma, the profound Mind of Nirvana, the Reality transcending all forms; the supreme and subtle teaching, inexpressible by words and speech; this mind seal outside of scriptures, I now transmit to Mahakashyapa." Mahakashyapa later became known as the first Patriarch of Zen.

This special teaching, the "mind seal", the essence of Buddhism, may be characterized by these lines (教外別傳，不立文字，直指人心，見性成佛):

*A special transmission outside the scriptures,  
Not dependent upon words and speech;  
Directly pointing at the mind,  
See into one's true nature and become a Buddha.*

## 2. Brief Biography of Bodhidharma

Mahakashyapa transmitted the mind seal to the second Patriarch Ananda, and on down to Bodhidharma, the 28<sup>th</sup> Zen Patriarch of India. Bodhidharma was a prince in southern India. After his father's death, he became the disciple of the 27<sup>th</sup> Patriarch Prajnadhara, and received transmission from him. Bodhidharma served by his master for 40 years until Prajnadhara passed away, and then, on his master's wish, sailed to China to spread the Zen teaching.

Bodhidharma arrived at Guangzhou circa 520 C.E. He met the Buddhist Emperor Wu of the Liang dynasty in the south, who did not comprehend the teaching. He then traveled north and meditated facing a wall in a cave at Shaolin Monastery for nine years. People called him the "Wall-Gazing Brahman." The belief that Bodhidharma was the founder of Chinese Martial Arts or Shaolin Kungfu have no historical basis. He eventually transmitted the mind seal to Huike 慧可, who then became the second Zen Patriarch of Chinese Zen. Sometimes affectionately called "The Red-Bearded Barbarian," Bodhidharma has also become a favorite subject of Chinese and Japanese art. Bodhidharma was poisoned by jealous peers and died around 535 C.E., but in another account, after he died, he was seen walking toward India with one sandal hanging from his staff and, in his coffin in China, only one sandal remained.

## 3. The Pearl of Wisdom 無價之寶

Bodhidharma was the third son of a king of southern India. The king was devoted to Buddhism, and offered a priceless pearl to the 27<sup>th</sup> Patriarch Prajnadhara.

Prajnadhara showed the pearl to the king's three princes and asked, "Is there anything more valuable than this pearl your father has just given me?" The first and second princes both said, "This pearl is the most precious in our treasury; there is none better in the world."

But Bodhidharma replied, "This is a worldly pearl, it is not the most precious thing. Among all jewels, the jewel of truth is supreme. This is a worldly luster, and cannot be considered the finest. Of all kinds of luster, the luster of wisdom is supreme. This pearl has a worldly lucidity, it is not the best. Among all that is lucid, lucidity of mind is supreme. This pearl cannot sparkle by itself; it needs the light of wisdom. With the light of wisdom, you can discern that it is a pearl, and that it is precious. Therefore the pearl is not precious in itself, and a pearl is not a pearl in itself. It is not a pearl in itself because it takes the pearl of wisdom to recognize this worldly pearl. It is not precious because it takes the treasure of wisdom to understand that the Dharma is truly precious. Because you, Venerable Master, understand the Way, wonderful treasures appear. When people attain the Way, the treasures of their mind will appear."

## 4. Meeting Emperor Wu 梁武帝請法

Bodhidharma was welcomed into the court of Emperor Wu of the Liang Dynasty, who ruled southern China at the time. The emperor was a great devotee and benefactor of Buddhism.

Emperor Wu eagerly asked the great master:

“I have established monasteries, printed sutras, and decreed the ordination of countless monks. What merits have I attained from all these deeds?”

Bodhidharma answered, “No merit.”

Confused, the emperor asked, “What, then, is the highest truth in Buddhism?”

“Emptiness. Nothing holy.”

“Who is it that faces me?”

“Don’t know.”

Emperor Wu could not comprehend Bodhidharma’s teaching.

Legend has it that Bodhidharma then sailed across the Yangtze River “on a single blade of grass,” and sat facing a wall in a cave near Shaolin Monastery for nine years.

## 5. The Essence of Mahayana Practice 達摩二入四行觀

There are few written works attributed to Bodhidharma’s. The most well-known of these is “Two Entrances and Four Practices,”(5) or simply “The Outline of Practice,”(3) but we feel the title is more aptly conveyed as “The Essence of Mahayana Practice.”(2) Other works include “The Bloodstream Sermon (血脈論),” “Breakthrough Sermon (破相論),” and “Wake-up Sermon (悟性論),” (4) among others. (6)

In “The Essence of Mahayana Practice,” we see an impartial attitude toward what came to be a point of contention in Zen regarding “sudden enlightenment” and “gradual cultivation.” To Bodhidharma, in fact, both are equally viable methods to gain enlightenment.

## 6. The Price of Enlightenment (Second Patriarch Huike) 慧可斷臂求法

The monk Huike had come a long way, hoping to learn from Bodhidharma. But Bodhidharma sat facing a wall at the Shaolin Monastery all day, ignoring him. It was getting dark and beginning to snow. Huike thought to himself, “Men of ancient times have sought the Way by smashing their bones to the marrow, feeding the hungry with their blood, spreading their hair to cover the muddy road for the master ... what is my little suffering in comparison?” He stood firm and by the next day snow had buried him up to his knees. Finally Bodhidharma took pity on him and asked, “What are you seeking?”

Huike sobbed and begged the master, “Please, have mercy, open the gate of nectar that can liberate sentient beings!”

The master said, “The supreme, profound Way of the Buddhas is attainable only after innumerable eons of striving, achieving the impossible, bearing the unbearable. How could a man like you, of little virtue and wisdom, filled with contempt and arrogance, ever hope to grasp it? You’re just wasting your time.”

Hearing the master’s scolding, Huike took out a sword and cut off his left arm.

Bodhidharma saw that Huike had the capacity to carry on the Dharma and said to him, “The Buddhas of the past have also disregarded their bodies to seek the Truth. You do have the potential.”  
Huike asked, “May I hear the Dharma seal of the Buddhas?”  
The master said, “The Dharma seal cannot be obtained from others.”  
Huike said, “My mind is not at peace.”  
The master answered “Bring me your mind, I will set it at peace it for you.”  
After a long silence Huike said, “I cannot find the mind anywhere.”  
Bodhidharma said, “I have already set your mind at peace.”

## 7. One Flower with Five Petals 一花開五葉

One day Bodhidharma called together his disciples and said, “The time has come for me to return. Each of you, say something to demonstrate your understanding.”

A disciple named Daofu said, “As I see it, the function of the Way is not bound by words and speech, nor is it separate from words and speech.”

Bodhidharma said, “You have attained my skin.”

The nun Zongchi said, “According to my understanding, it is like Ananda’s glimpse of the realm of Akshobhya Buddha. Seen once, it is never seen again.”

Bodhidharma said, “You have attained my flesh.”

A disciple named Daoyu said, “The four elements are all empty and the five skandhas are without actual existence. I see that there is not a single dharma to be grasped.”

Bodhidharma said, “You’ve attained my bones.”

Finally, without saying anything, Huike bowed and stood in his place.

Bodhidharma said, “You have attained my marrow.”

And Bodhidharma recited the following poem:

*Originally I came to this land  
To rescue the deluded by transmitting the Dharma.  
One flower will open with five petals  
And the fruit will ripen by itself.*

## 8. Why Did Bodhidharma Come to the East? 祖師西來意

This question (literally “What is the meaning/significance of Bodhidharma’s coming from the West?”) has become a famous koan (Chinese: Gong-An 公案) to mean “What is the essence of the Buddha’s teaching?”

- ‘ “What is the meaning of Bodhidharma coming to the West?” Master Zhaozou said, “The cypress seed in the courtyard.” 問：如何是祖師西來意？趙州曰：庭前柏樹子。
- ‘ “Why ...East?” Master Shitou said, “Ask the pillar in the courtyard.” “I don’t understand.” “I understand even less.” The disciple suddenly had an awakening. 石頭

曰：問取露柱。曰：學人不會。師曰：我更不會。子俄省悟。

“Why ~ East?” Master Longya said, “This is a tough one.” 龍牙曰：「此一問最苦。」

“Why ~ East?” Master Xuefeng said, “The sky is blue, the sun is shining, why are you sleep-talking?” 雪峰云：「青天白日寐語作麼。」

“Why ~ East?” Master Baiyun said, “The birds fly, the rabbits jump.” 白雲曰：鳥飛兔走。

“Why ~ East?” Master Yunmen said, “The mountain, the river, and the earth.” 雲門曰：山河大地。

“Why ~ East?” Damei said, “There is no meaning in his coming from the West.” Master Yanguan heard it and said, “One coffin, two dead men.” 大梅曰：西來無意。鹽官聞乃曰：一個棺材，兩個死漢。

Master Zhaozhou asked, “Why ~ East?” Master Linji said, “I’m just washing my feet.” On another occasion, Linji also said, “If you think there is a meaning, you can’t liberate yourself.” A disciple asked, “If there is no meaning, then why did the Second Patriarch received the transmission?” Linji said, “He attained what cannot be attained.” “What is this which cannot be attained?” “It’s simply because you seek all over the place, so your mind is restless. It’s what patriarchs called ‘using your head to look for your head.’ When you hear this, immediately reflect inward, do not seek elsewhere! Know that your body and mind is no different from that of the Buddhas and patriarchs, that there is absolutely nothing more, that is receiving the transmission.”

## 9. Further Readings

- (1) Original Chinese Sources: 景德傳燈錄，五燈會元，達摩四行觀，指月錄
- (2) “Essence of Mahayana Practice” by Bodhidharma, translated by Chung Tai Translation Committee, version 3.2, 2004.
- (3) “Zen’s Chinese Heritage: The Masters and Their Teachings” by Andy Ferguson, 2000, Wisdom Publications. (*A good reference book of translated Chinese Zen records.*)
- (4) “The Zen Teachings of Bodhidharma” by Red Pine, 1987, North Point Press. (*A reasonable translation of important Bodhidharma works not available elsewhere, with original Chinese included.*)
- (5) “A New Zen Reader” by N. Foster & J. Shoemaker, eds., 1996, Ecco Press. (*Useful as a reference of translated Zen Records. However, the authors seem to have a rather cynical attitude toward much of the history and lore of Chan Buddhism, and we disagree with many of their commentaries in the book.*)
- (6) “The Bodhidharma Anthology: The Earliest Records of Zen” by J. L. Broughton, 1999, Univ. of Calif. Press.
- (7) “Chan Buddhism” by P. D. Hershock, 2005, Univ. of Hawaii Press.
- (8) “Why Has Bodhidharma Left for the East?” directed by Bae Yong-kyun, 137 minutes, 1993, released on DVD 2002. (*A very nice Korean movie on Zen.*)