

THE LEGEND OF THE REVEREND BODHIDHARMA

Before taking monkery, Bodhidharma had originally been a prince, being the third son of King Syandria of Hindu. He gave up his comfortable palatial life when a mere child and went to the monastery, where Prajnaratna lived, to become the latter's disciple. Prajnaratna belonged in the 27th generation of religious descendants of Mahakasyapa, senior disciple of Sakyamuni. One day Bodhidharma approached Prajnaratna for advice, raising to him the question: "In which direction should I travel to spread your teachings since I have now fully mastered Mahayana tripitaka?" "CATHY (that is China) is exactly where you should go," said Prajnaratna. Then he added, "Once you're in CATHY, do shun its southern part. For the monarch there is averse to Buddhism because of his audacious ambition. "Thus Bodhidharma embarked on his voyage to China, sailing in a boat across the sea. He had drifted on the rough sea for three years before he landed in Canton which is now called Guangzhou. Prefect of Canton promptly reported Bodhidharma's arrival to the throne in Jinling which is now called Nanjing. At that time Jinling was the imperial capital of the Liang Dynasty. On the throne then was Emperor Wudi who, on receiving the report from the prefect of Canton, promptly dispatched an envoy to Canton in order to take Bodhidharma to the imperial court in Jinling. To pay due respect to his Hindu guest, the emperor granted an immediate audience to Bodhidharma after the latter was taken to the imperial capital.

As the emperor was a devout Hinayanistic follower whereas Bodhidharma was a staunch Mahayanistic monk, both the emperor and Bodhidharma were at variance as to their religious outlooks even during the first audience the emperor gave to him.

Doctrinal discrepancies drove them into fierce polemics in all later audiences the monarch granted to the monk. Now Bodhidharma was awakened to the fact that in the territory of the Empire of Liang he could hardly expect to spread Mahayana Buddhism.

Therefore he decided to leave for the northern part of China and before long bade farewell to the Liang dynastic ruler. On the day he was to depart, he had to go first out of the city of Jinling to Yuhuatai on its suburbs. Coincidentally a celebrated

Chinese Buddhist monk, Shengguan by name, happened to be preaching Buddhism at Yuhuatai. A vast crowd rallied around Shengguan, listening to his religious discourse.

Seeing this when he was passing Yuhuatai, Bodhidharma edged his way through the crowd until he was standing in the front row and almost directly facing Shengguan who was talking from the pulpit. Bodhidharma inadvertently nodded the moment he thought

Shengguan was expounding Buddha's teachings properly and shook his head involuntarily

the moment he thought Shengguan was straying from the true tenet of Buddhism. Before long Shengguan became aware of Bodhidharma's varying facial expressions of approval and disapproval of different parts of his discourse and grew irritated by the latter's expression of disapproval. He suddenly stopped preaching and turned to look at Bodhidharma and demanded, "Why did you repeatedly shake your head when I was offering my

sermon?" Bodhidharma would have launched into an argument with Shengguan but thought better of it. Then he started to leave the crowd and walked to the bank of the Yangtse River; there he waited for the ferry to take him to the northern bank of the river. After Bodhidharma left, a scholar in the crowd called out to Shengguan, saying, "Don't you know him? He is the famous Hindu monk, Bodhidharma, an erudite master of Buddhism." Being shocked on being acquainted with the identity of the leaving monk and feeling ashamed of his own rude manners toward him, Shengguan abruptly left the convention to pursue the latter in order to offer an apology to him. But Bodhidharma was already a long distance away from where Shengguan was. On reaching the southern bank of the Yangtse River, Bodhidharma could see that there was not a soul in sight; nor was there a ferry boat moored to the bank. Nor a bridge to be seen along the bank. He grew anxious and was casting about for a way out when, turning about, he suddenly discerned a tree standing not far away from the bank. In its shade sat an old woman. A sheaf of reeds lay by her. Bodhidharma wondered if she was also waiting for the incoming ferry boat. "But," he said to himself; "effete as she looks, how come she comes here to take the ferry boat all by herself?" When he was still gazing at her, he suddenly noticed that she was beckoning him to go to her. Promptly he obeyed and hurried over. Soon he was in her presence and bowed respectfully to her before he began to talk to her. "Madam, is there anything I can do for you?" he asked politely. "Don't you think it is more appropriate," said she, smiling; "that you ask me to help you with crossing the river?" "How do you know I want to cross the river, madam?" asked Bodhidharma in astonishment.

While still smiling, she said to him, instead of giving a direct answer to his question,
"Take a reed out of this sheaf, walk to the bank, lay the reed on the water,
and step on to it. Then it will carry you safely across the river to the other bank.

" Before he reached out to catch a reed and pull it out of the sheaf, she had already drawn one out for him and passed it to him. He stretched out his both hands for it and curtseyed to her.

"Now take the reed with you," said she, "and off you go to the bank. " He complied readily. Having returned to the bank, he stood himself nearest to the water and spread the reed on the water.

Instantly the stalk of the reed grew thicker and longer until it looked like a log.

Now Bodhidharma, cheerful and energetic, hopped on to it; and promptly it moved away from the bank and sped up, plowing the water like a sailboat in the direction of the opposite bank. In a couple of jiffies he was at the other bank.

Having jumped off the reed, he saw it shrink and change into a dragonfly; then it took off in the direction of the bank, from whence it had come. The moment that Bodhidharma hopped on to the reed to dash across the river,

Monk Shengguan had just rushed to the bank. He saw how Bodhidharma crossed the river by standing on the reed stalk. Immediately he darted to the old woman sitting under the tree and, being so rash as not even to pause to ask for her permission,

scooped up the sheaf of reeds lying by her. Then he ran quickly with the sheaf of reeds back to the bank, threw it into the river, and swiftly stepped on to it, believing that the sheaf of reeds would ferry him swiftly across the river to the opposite bank exactly in the way that the single reed had done in ferrying Bodhidharma across the river.

But, contrary to his expectation, rather than keeping itself afloat in the river and carrying him over to the other bank, the sheaf of reeds sank quickly below the surface of water after he stepped on to it.

With the sinking sheaf, he was pulled down to the depth of the river.

Had he not kept buffeting the rolling water desperately, he would have drowned.

Wild with anger after he had managed to struggle out of the water and climb up the bank,

he stomped up to the old woman and howled, "Madam, I haven't done anything to offend you,

have I? Why did you play such a nasty trick on me? You gave that monk a magic reed that helped him cross the river safely.

But you left me a sheaf of cursed reeds which almost took my life.

Your trick almost drowned me. Now you must say sorry to me for certain.

"Facing his incrimination calmly, she said, "That monk came to me and very politely asked me to help him cross the river.

So I gave him a magic reed which has worked wonderfully, as you've just seen. But you did not come for my help, did you?.

What you did was robbing me of that bundle of reeds. You treated me with the least respect. In that case,

how could you expect me to have those reeds endowed with my magic power? You said I must apologize to you? Why?

Have I to offer apology to a Buddhist monk who has robbed me? Shame on you because you have done things that are against Buddha's teachings.

Buddhist vinaya, as far as I know, never allows a monk to commit robbery or to be presumptuous."

Now Shengguan felt really ashamed for what he had done and said to the old woman. He immediately withdrew from her presence

and intended to go back to the imperial capital. He strolled weakly in its direction. After taking a few steps, he looked sheepishly

back

where he thought the old woman must have remained. But to his amazement she was nowhere to be found.

She disappeared altogether. It dawned upon him that she must be a deity incarnated in human form.

After Bodhidharma crossed the Yangtse River, he traveled on foot all the way to Henan Province. In 527 AD,

he came to Shaolin Buddhist Monastery in Mount Song. Landscape in Mount Song pleased him. The monastery was very quiet.

All the monks living in it were pious Buddhists. He thought that the monastery itself was virtually a "Pure Land" or "Sukhavati" most conducive to realizing his desire of attaining Buddhahood. So he settled down there.

After having successfully formulated the basic tenet of the Chinese Ch'an Sect during his long course of higher contemplation lasting for over nine years in the monastery, he emerged from such a meditating practice and began to preach his Ch'an theology first to the monastic population and then to the general public.

After his nirvana, he was acclaimed as the founder of the aforesaid Buddhist sect.

And the monastery has ever since been recognized as "place of origin of Ch'an".

Engraved on a stone stela now still standing in the monastery is a representation of Bodhidharma sailing across the Yangtse River by poising himself on the stalk of a reed.

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