Denkoroku: Record of the Transmission of Luminosity 29

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Chapter 29: Bodhidharma

Koan

The Venerable Prajnatara asks Bodhidharma, “What is it that is formless amongst things?”

Bodhidharma says, “Formlessness is unborn.”

Prajnatara asks, “What is the highest amongst things?”

Bodhidharma says, “The Actual Nature is the highest.”

Comments

Bodhidharma was born into the Kshtraya caste. His original name was Bodhitara and he was the third son of the king of Koshi in southern India. This king was a great devotee of the Buddhadharma and once he made an offering of a precious jewel to Prajnatara.

The king had three sons, named Chandravimalatara, Punyatara and Bodhitara. Wishing to test the wisdom of these three princes, Prajnatara held up the jewel that their father had offered and said, “Is there anything which can compare to this jewel?”

The first two princes said, “This jewel is the finest of all precious gems and can be surpassed by none. Only one of your spiritual greatness would be worthy to receive it.”

The third prince was Bodhitara, and he said, “This is just a mundane gem and cannot be counted within the highest rank because the highest of all jewels is the jewel of reality. This has only a mundane glittering and cannot be considered to be the highest because the lustre of wisdom is supreme. This has a mundane clarity and cannot be considered to be the finest because the clarity of Awareness is supreme.

“This jewel cannot even sparkle as it does without the luminosity that knows its gleaming. If you know, you know that this is a jewel and knowing it as a jewel, you know that it is precious. If you know that it is precious, then you should know that it’s value is not true value itself. If you know that this is a jewel, you should also know that the jewel is not a jewel itself.

“This jewel is not a jewel because it is only the jewel of knowing that can discern it as even a mundane jewel. Its value is not true value itself because it is only the jewel of knowing that has true value.

“The Way that you teach is a treasury of knowing and thus you have been offered this mundane treasure. Just as this treasure has appeared due to your wisdom, so may the treasure of Awareness appear in those who awaken to it.”

When the Venerable Master Prajnatara heard this eloquent understanding from the third prince, he knew that this was the incarnation of a sage and saw that the prince would be the heir to his Dharma. However, the moment was not yet ripe, and so he kept silent and left Bodhitara still mixed with the others.

Later, however, Prajnatara asks the prince, “What is it that is formless amongst things?”

The prince answers, “Formlessness is unborn.”

The Venerable Master asks, “What is it that all things are hung on?”

The prince answers, “All things hang on the sense of self and other.”

Finally, Prajnatara asks, “What is the highest amongst things?”

The prince says, “The Actual Nature is the highest.”

Although this discussion showed the resonance between the minds of teacher and student, Prajnatara still waited until the moment had ripened.

Some time after this, the king died. While everyone was mourning, Bodhitara sat before the coffin in samadhi for seven days. When he left this he went to Prajnatara and requested ordination as a monk. Seeing that the moment had arrived, Prajnatara conferred the precepts and ordained the prince.

Following this, Bodhitara sat and practiced for seven days before the presence of Prajnatara and received complete instructions from Prajnatara on the subtleties of practice. On hearing these teachings, Bodhitara realized supreme insight.

Prajnatara said to him, “You have complete wisdom into all principles of the Dharma. “Dharma” means complete knowing. Thus I shall name you Bodhidharma.”

Having received the transmission, Bodhidharma knelt and asked, “I have realized the Dharma. Now where shall I go to do the work of the Buddhas?”

Prajnatara said, “You have realized the Dharma. Stay here in southern India for a time. Sixty-seven years following my death you should travel to China and establish there strong medicine to teach those of excellent potential.”

Bodhidharma asked, “Will I be able to find those who can become vessels this teaching? Will there be troubles there over the next thousand years?”

Prajnatara answered, “There will be numberless people who will wake up in that land where you shall teach. There will be some trouble so you should lay low. When you arrive in China, don’t tarry in the south because the people there are only interested in ‘good works’ and do not know the essence of the Buddhadharma.” Prajnatara then gave a teaching verse to Bodhidharma:

On the way you will cross a stream
and meet a sheep.
Alone and restless
you will cross the dark water.
Under the sun, kindness
to two animals: elephant and horse.
Two cassia saplings will flourish forever.

He also said, “You will encounter one in the forests who will realize enlightenment.”

He spoke this verse as well:

China is broad but there is no other road
for you to find those who will follow your path.
A golden rooster can pick up a single grain
to sustain all of the sages of the world.

Having thus received the transmission and instructions, Bodhidharma attended Prajnatara for forty years. Following Prajnatara’s death, Bodhidharma began to teach as did his fellow heir Buddhasena. Another heir named Bodhisanta had broken the transmission into six different sects but Bodhidharma was able to unify these through his teaching and was revered throughout the land.

After sixty years had thus passed, Bodhidharma knew that the time was come to journey to China. He went to the ruler of the people and said, “Dedicate yourself to the Buddha, the Dharma and the Sangha and thus be of benefit to the people. It is now time for me to go to China. When this work is done, I shall return.”

The king wept and said, “What crime has this country commited and why is that one so auspicious? Still, when your work in China is completed, do not forget the land of your birth and come back to us.” The king accompanied him to the part and watched his departure.

Bodhidharma travelled for three years by sea and finally arrived in southern China in the year 527. From

there he was called to his meeting with Emperor Wu of the Liang dynasty of southern China. This is what Prajnatara was speaking of when he said, “don’t tarry in the south.” From there Bodhidharma travelled to the northern kingdom of Wei. It is said that he travelled on a reed; some people have taken this literally and so Bodhidharma is sometimes painted standing on a river but this is wrong. The reed was a reed-shaped boat, not an actual reed. “Meeting a sheep” was a reference to Emperor Wu of Liang. “Crossing the dark water” meant the Yangzi river which was the border between the kingdom of Wei in the north and Liang in the south.

Bodhidharma then arrived at the Shaolin-si near Songshan and stayed there in the eastern hall. He sat there throughout the day and night. No one could understand anything about him and they just referred to him as the “wall-gazing Brahmin.” Bodhidharma just sat in this way without complicated explanations or trying to hurry up his presentation.

After nine years he passed on his “skin, meat, bones, and marrow” to his four disciples Daofu, Daoyu, Congzhi, and Huike when he saw that their potentials were ripe.

At this time there were two teachers of deviant paths called Bodhiruci and Guangtong who were angered because of the way that Bodhidharma’s virtue was known throughout the land and that he was honoured and trusted by so many. Once they stoned him and smashed out his front teeth and they even tried to poison him five times.

The sixth time, Bodhidharma poured the poison out onto a large rock and the rock split. Finding that his work was now complete, he thought to himself, “Having received the transmission and predictions from my Master, I saw in the sky signs that there will be people with capacity for this great teaching but since my meeting with Emperor Wu of Liang I was unable to find anyone suitable. I sat in coolness, doing nothing for nine years until I found the unexcelled Huike and to him I have transmitted my realization of the Way. I have done this and now the time is over. I will leave.” Having said this, he then died in zazen. He is buried on Mount Xionger. There is a later story that a man named Songyun met him in the Himalayan mountains, but the truth is that he was buried at Mount Xionger.

Teisho

Through the transmission and final teachings of the Venerable Master Prajnatara, Bodhidharma became the founder of Zen in China. In his first meeting with Prajnatara when he was explaining about the jewel, Prajnatara asks him, “What is it that is formless amongst things?” Bodhidharma says, “Formlessness is unborn.”

Even if you speak about silent emptiness, this isn’t really formless. Thus he said, “Formlessness is unborn.” If your understanding is like scaling a mile high sheer cliff, then you can clearly understand it as everything and realize that everything is nothing else. But this is still not the unborn and so it is not formlessness. Before any division betwen heaven and earth how can there be any split between holy and profane? In this realm, not a single thing appears and there is not even a speck that can stain it. It is not that there is originally some kind of blankness but rather that you are emptied and open, cleary aware, wide awake and without confusion. There is nothing to compare anything to and there is nothing other than just this. Thus it is called “the highest among things.” Thus the highest is called “beyond concept” and this “beyond concept” is called the Actual Nature.

Even a priceless gem cannot be compared to it and even the clear luminosity of the mind cannot objectify itself. Thus Bodhidharma said that the jewel had only a worldly glitter that could not be considered the finest because the clarity of Awareness is supreme. This understanding was natural to him and so when he sat for seven days and received the complete and subtle teachings he realized the supreme wisdom of the Way.

You should know that is through such detailed examinination and true entry that you know for yourself what the Buddhas and Zen Masters have realized. Through clarifying what the Awakened Ones of the past have realized, one becomes a true descendant of the Buddhas. We can see this fact through the example of this worthy one; although he had already deep natural wisdom, he went on and realized the supreme wisdom of the Way. As well he Mastered the mind of being able to preserve and maintain it for the future. He practiced deeply through forty years of attending to Prajnatara and then for another sixty carried Prajnatara's gift for the future. After three years crossing the sea he arrived in a foriegn land and sat in coolness for nine years until he found persons with the capacity for this great teaching. Finally he was able to repay his debt to his teacher by establishing the True Dharma of the Buddhas. His hardships were the hardest and his austerities the most austere.

Zen students these days though want to take it easy even though the times are so degenerate and people's capacities are so small. I am afraid that I must tell you people who would like to claim to have attained what you have not that you are just too full of yourselves and that you should just withdraw from the practice of Zen.

If you have any penetration at all into this koan then you will see just how profound it all is and that it gets more and more so. Break up this "mind" and let go of this "body." Just deeply question into the Way and through the subtle transmission of the Awakened Ones you will directly meet for yourself what the Buddhas have realized. Don't think that your little understandings and insights are all that there is.

Once more, I've got a little poem:

Nothing is located anywhere:
no boundary
and no outside.
Is there even
the slightest thing?