Wherever You Stand 7: Who: Daman Hongren

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Previously in “Wherever You Stand”…

We were looking at the four Chinese Ancestors,
starting with Bodhidharma,
Huike,
Sengcan,
Daoxin,

and now, today:
Daman Hongren,
who was born in 601 C.E.,
died in 674 C.E.

Now, as with all the other Chan Ancestors, reports vary as to the circumstance of birth, and stories of the early life. It’s interesting that throughout history, there has always been all sorts of stories going around about who was the mother. How did that happen? Who was responsible for it? And what happened to the child?

So Daman Hongren is not exempt from this. It is said about him that when he was older he supported his mother when the father abandoned the family. There is conjecture that his family may have been wealthy. Some say the family home may have been converted into a monastery, and the mention of Hongren as doing manual labour as if it were unusual may have been significant because he was a person of high or upper class birth.

Well, another story says that in a previous life Hongren was a Daoist who planted trees on the Twin Peaks. He asked the Fourth Ancestor to explain the Dharma to him.

Daoxin said:

“You are already old.
If I were to explain it to you,
you couldn’t use it to save beings.
But if you come here again in the next life,
I’ll be waiting for you.”

The old man left, walking to the river bank, he saw a young woman washing cloths or clothes.

Bowing he asked:
“May I spend the night in this place?”

The young woman said:
“You’ll have to ask my father and brother.”

The old man said: ”
Well give me your answer and I’ll be on my way.”

She nodded okay and the old man walked away.

The young woman returned home and was found to be pregnant. She was driven out of the house by her father and brother and to support herself she made garments during the day and found guest houses to stay in. Eventually she gave birth to a son and, blaming him for everything that was going on, she deemed him to be unlucky and left him in a pool of amniotic fluid on the floor and wouldn’t care for him.

But the next day, lo and behold, the child had removed himself so she started to care for him.

The child, who was apparently Hongren, followed his mother when she begged for food. People called him the “No Name Child”.

A wise man encountered the mother and child and said: ”
This child lacks only seven of the distinguishing marks of a Buddha.
Only the Tathagata surpasses him.”

And Hongren eventually encountered Daoxin, becoming his heir and expounding his Teachings at Mount Putuo. It is said that Hongren didn’t write anything down but he taught and his talks were written down later on.

Another story about Daoxin meeting Hongren is based in the fact that the young man’s family name is pronounced the same as that name for “nature”. So Daoxin asked the young man his family name. Hongren answered as thought it had been, “What is your nature?” So he was deliberately, it is said by this source, misinterpreting the word.

Hongren said:
“My nature is not ordinary, it is Buddhanature.”

Daoxin said:
“Don’t you have a family name?”

Hongren:
“No, for the Teachings say our nature is empty.”

So a little bit of play on words there.

In the “Denkoroko” as translated by Anzan Hoshin roshi, in the Chapter on Daman Hongren, the koan is this:

> *The Thirty-Second Ancestor, Zen Master Daman Hongren meets the Thirty-First Ancestor on a street in Huangmei:*
>
> *The Ancestor asks, “What is your family name [xing]?”*
>
> *Hongren says, “I have a nature [xing], but it is not the usual name [xing].”*
>
> *The Ancestor asks again, “What family name do you have?”*

He says, "My nature is Buddha Nature [fa-xing]."

The Ancestor asks, "Do you have no name?" He answers, "My nature is emptiness."

The Ancestor, recognizing his capacity as a vessel of the Dharma, transmits the Teachings and the robe to him.

Now it is said that Hongren was maybe seven or twelve when he met Daoxin, started to study with him. He stayed with him until Daoxin's death in 651 and as we remember from the last talk on Daoxin, there was established by Daoxin a large community, or a community of monks which were staying in one place and which became quite large.

During the time when Hongren was there there were apparently over 1000 monks and when Daoxin died, Hongren became Abbott. The Teachings of Daoxin and Hongren became known as the East Mountain Teachings.

Hongren was significant in the development of early Chinese Chan and it is said that 8 or 9 out of 10 monks and lay students had studied with him, so this approach that he taught apparently became very popular. And again, these Teachings were called the East Mountain Teachings. Daoxin started it but Hongren became more prominent in the East Mountain Teachings.

It is said in later traditional stories that after Daoxin died, Hongren moved the community of monks to Mount Dong-shan "East Mountain", easterly of the "Twin Peaks". The East Mountain Teachings have been seen as the most authentic Chan Teachings.

A compilation of Hongren's work was put together shortly after his death, a treatise on the essentials of cultivating the mind and this was, according to some sources, the earliest compilation of Chan Teachings.

Hongren taught meditation practice as we would understand it. Hongren's students included Vinaya specialists, sutra translators, Lotus sutra and Pureland devotees. Hongren taught that Pure Mind, Essential Awareness was there all the time, even when it was obscured by discriminating thoughts, false thoughts and ascriptive views. By eliminating false thoughts and stabilizing Awareness, it would be assured that Nirvana would naturally arise.

One translation of a portion of his Teachings, a statement of his thought was:

View your own consciousness tranquilly and attentively, so that you can see how it is always moving, like flowing water or a glittering mirage. …until its fluctuations dissolve into peaceful stability. This flowing consciousness will disappear like a gust of wind. When this consciousness disappears, all one's illusions will disappear along with it.

Another translation of his thought, and bearing in mind these were different people doing translations with different understandings, I'm sure sticking as close as they possibly could, and were interpreting words as best they could. So what we can do is read what they say and recognize through our own experience what is being talked about. And again, Hongren was a very important Chan Ancestor because of teaching, basically, practice as we would understand it.

> *The key to cultivating the Way is knowing that your own mind is originally pure, that it is neither created nor destroyed and that it is free of discrimination. The mind whose nature is perfectly pure is your true Teacher and superior to any of the Buddhas of the Ten Directions you might call upon. If you concentrate on guarding the mind, delusions will no longer arise and the Reality of Nirvana will spontaneously arise, thus you should know that your mind is originally pure.*

Hongren did give transmission to a number of people. The most prominent of which, or the person who became the most prominent was Huineng, the Sixth and the last founding Chan/Chinese Ancestor.

Now there were numerous schools of thought around, schools of approaches to practice, and there were factional splits which of course will colour the interpretation of the life of people who came previous to those factional splits.

A split was between the Gradual or Sudden Enlightenment schools. They mean exactly what it says: There was the Sudden Enlightenment school and the Gradual Enlightenment school.

Now one way of looking at that which I like, is to recognize, as has been spoken of in various texts: sudden enlightenment, gradual practice.

So the Sudden Enlightenment is recognizing that it's a good idea to practise your life.
You have this moment when you wake up and think:
"Is this all there is? Is this what's going on?"
Or there's a moment when you wake up to Reality
and see the luminosity of experiencing
when it is unclouded by obstructions of any sort.
Then comes the gradual practice part,
which is "upski downski"
isn't it?… [students and Sensei laugh]

But you put one foot in front of the other,
you do what has to be done,
your bum goes down on that zafu,
you watch your "mind running down that wall"
and you wake up to
the actual nature of experiencing.

So this is something that has been going on for 1300-some years.

I encourage you to keep on doing what you're doing.
You've recognized the need to practise
because here you are,
right here
right now,
actually practising,
when you notice anything at all
about experience.

Feel the breath
feel the whole bodymind in this moment
and recognize
how important it is
to keep this information
to verify it through your own experience of it
and should you find yourself in such a situation,
having recognized the truth of the practice,
that you will practise,
and some of you teach
beyond convenience.

It's really important.

Next time we'll look at the Sixth Ancestor, Huineng.

Before closing, I will read a few verses from the "Shodoka: Song of Freedom", written by Yoka daishi before 713, and you'll start to see how the understanding of the Teachers that we've spoken of, the five Chan Ancestors, the Sixth who was the Teacher of Yoka daishi, affected his understanding and what he wrote.

The Realm of Reality of all Buddhas is my own nature,
my own nature is all the Thus Come Ones.

One stage of practice contains all stages,
without form, without thought or action.

In a finger snap eighty thousand doors are open
and three great eons vanish in an instant.

Names and categories and being without them
have nothing to do with Perfect Knowing.

It is without praise or blame,
It is without boundaries, like space.

It is wherever you stand.

It is free of struggle and searching.

It cannot be held or released.

Give up the search.
It is here.

Thank you for listening.

Have fun!