

On the Cypress Tree

(*Hakujushi*)

Translator's Introduction: The subject of this discourse derives from a kōan story in which a monk asks Meditation Master Jōshū what Bodhidharma's intent was in coming to China. Jōshū responds by alluding to a tree called a '*hakuju*' in Japanese and a '*pai-shu*' in Chinese. Even though these two words are written with the same Chinese characters, they designate two different types of tree: the Japanese *hakuju* tree is an oak (a deciduous tree), whereas the Chinese *pai-shu* tree is a type of cypress (an evergreen conifer).

In China, since at least the time of Confucius, the cypress has been paired with the pine tree. Because these two trees, unlike all others, do not lose their foliage even in the severest of winters, they have been used as a common metaphor in China for friends who remain constant in adversity. When this metaphorical meaning is applied to Jōshū's alluding to the cypress, it describes the intent behind Bodhidharma's coming to China, namely, to find a true spiritual friend (disciple) who would remain constant in adversity. The one he found was Eka, who proved his constancy by standing in the courtyard outside Bodhidharma's quarters in the ever-deepening snow and then later proffering his 'severed arm' to the Indian Master as evidence of his commitment. (This 'severing' may refer to giving up one's attachments rather than to a literal, physical act.) The nature of the relationship between Bodhidharma as Master and Eka as disciple becomes clearer when Bodhidharma is seen to represent the pine (a common metaphor for the Eternal) and Eka is seen as the cypress. In a subsequent kōan story, this relationship is expressed as the Empty Sky and the cypress tree.

Jōshū was of the thirty-seventh generation after the Tathagata Shakyamuni. He was sixty-one years old when he first gave rise to the intention to seek the Truth and left home life behind to explore the Way. At that time he made a vow, saying, "Even if someone is a hundred years old, if that person is spiritually less advanced than I, I shall offer that person Teaching. And even if someone is seven years old, if that person has spiritually surpassed me, I shall ask that person for Teaching." Vowing thus, he drifted southward like a cloud.

While wandering about in search of the True Way, Jōshū chanced to arrive at Mount Nansen, whereupon he went to make his prostrations to the Abbot, the monk Nansen Fugan, who happened to be in his quarters, resting, when Jōshū came for his initial interview.

Nansen immediately asked him, "Where have you just come from?"

Jōshū replied, “From the Hall of the Auspicious Image.”¹

Nansen asked, “And have you seen the Auspicious Image?”

Jōshū replied, “I have not yet seen the Auspicious Image, but what I have encountered is a reclining Tathagata.”²

Thereupon Nansen immediately arose and asked him, “Are you a novice that has a Master not?”

Jōshū responded, “A novice that has found his Master.”³

Nansen then asked, “And just who is that Master of yours?”

Jōshū replied, with all sincerity, “Though the early spring is still cold,⁴ as I was doing my prostrations, I could not help but reflect on how grateful I am for the health of your august body, Venerable Monk. It is like ten thousand blessings.”

Thereupon, Nansen called for the Head Monk of the Meditation Hall and told him, “Put this novice in the special place!”⁵

Thus it was that Jōshū took up residence with Nansen, and, for thirty years, did his utmost to practice the Way, without once going off to some other temple. He never idled away a moment or engaged in other pursuits. Then, after he had been Transmitted and received the methods for teaching others how to train in the Way, he took up residence in Kannon-in Monastery in Jōshū Province for another thirty years. While he was Abbot there, the things he did and how he did them were different from the behavior of ordinary monks in other places.

On one occasion, he composed the following verse:

*In vain do I gaze upon the smoke from the hearths of my
neighbors on all sides.*

*Jam-filled buns and rice cakes, for a year now, have
parted company from me.*

Thinking about them today, I can only swallow my spit.

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1. The name of a temple building on Mount Nansen.
 2. Nansen’s question has a double meaning. Taken on a conventional level it simply refers to a statue of the Buddha that is in a particular temple hall, whereas on a spiritual level it is asking Jōshū whether he has had a kenshō yet. Jōshū’s response takes the latter intent.
 3. That is, as his subsequent remark implies, he already regards Nansen as his Master.
 4. Jōshū’s reference to the early spring being cold is his way of expressing how young and inexperienced he is in training with a Master.
 5. The ‘special place’ is an area in the Meditation Hall directly behind the senior monks. New novices who had already demonstrated their understanding of what monastic life is about were seated there.

Periods of mindfulness are few, bemoanings all too frequent.

Among hundreds of families, not a single good and friendly face is to be found.

Those who come by merely say, "I've just dropped in for a cup of tea."

Unable to have any tea, they leave in a snit.

How sad that a smoking fire in his own hearth was rare, that even a one-dish meal was so scarce, and that he had not had a varied meal since the year before. When anyone from among those hundreds of families came, they were in search of a cup of tea, and those who were not in search of a cup of tea did not come at all. There was not one from amongst those hundreds of families who came bringing tea.⁶ Occasionally, there was a novice who came to look at 'the wise one',⁷ but there was not a single dragon elephant* who wished to be his equal.

On another occasion he composed a verse:

When I think about those throughout the country who have left home life behind,

How many can there be whose state resembles my state in life?

Earth for a bed, broken reeds for a mat,

An old elm branch for a pillow, and nothing at all for a coverlet.

Before His revered image, there is no Peaceful Breath incense to be burned,

And from the ashes all I smell is the scent of cow dung."⁸

From what he said, we should recognize the spotlessness and purity of his temple, and we should learn from these traces that he left behind for us today. There were

6. 'In search of a cup of tea' is a Zen Buddhist metaphor for someone seeking a Master in order to get 'enlightenment' but, in Jōshū's case, none were willing to stay and train. 'Bringing tea' is an allusion to those who come to a Master and selflessly offer their training, or to someone who has had a kenshō and seeks to have it confirmed.

7. This is an allusion to the custom of monks, and novices in particular, to go traveling to other monasteries during the summer months in order to train under a Master other than their own.

* See *Glossary*.

8. Peaceful Breath was a type of incense made from a tree resin and widely used in temples throughout China. The cheapest forms of incense were made from cow dung.

not many monks in his assembly, maybe twenty at most. His Monks' Hall was not large, lacking both a front hall and a back hall.⁹ It had no lighting at night and there was no charcoal for wintry weather. Sad to say, the conditions there could be described as the way that old folks live in their declining years. And the deportment of Old Buddhas was like this.

Once when a leg on his meditation platform broke, Jōshū tied a charred log to it and it lasted for years. Whenever an officer of the temple commented that the leg needed to be repaired, the Master would not permit it. This is a good example, one rare in any generation.

Customarily, the rice for their gruel was so thinned down that there was not even a single grain of rice in it, so the monks would distract themselves at meals by turning their gaze towards tranquil windows or towards the dust in some crack. Sometimes they would gather nuts or berries, which both the assembly of monks and the Abbot himself would use for their daily sustenance. We trainees of today should praise this deportment, and though we do not surpass the Master's deportment, we should make our attitude of mind one of fond respect for the past.



Once, when Jōshū was addressing his assembly, he said:

For thirty years, I lived in the south intent on nothing but doing seated meditation. If any of you wish to realize the One Great Matter,* you will encounter It by pursuing the principle of doing seated meditation. If after three years, or five years, or twenty years, or even thirty years, you can still say that you have not realized the Truth, take the skull of this old monk and make it into a pot to piss in.

That is the kind of vow he took. Truly, doing the practice of seated meditation is the straight road of the Buddha's Way. We should follow the principle of "Just sit and you shall see what happens." Later, people would say of him, "Jōshū was truly an Old Buddha."



Great Master Jōshū once had a monk who asked him, "What did our Ancestral Master Bodhidharma come from the West for?"

The Master replied, "For a cypress tree in the courtyard."

9. The front hall contained meditation platforms which were used by temple officials and guests. The back hall traditionally contained a washstand and was used as a cleanup area for the monks who lived in the Monks' Hall.

The monk then said, “Venerable Monk, pray, do not use some physical object to point it out to a person like me.”

The Master said, “I am not pointing it out to you by using a physical object.”

The monk again asked, “Well then, what did our Ancestral Master come from the West for?”

The Master replied, “For a cypress tree in the courtyard.”¹⁰

Although this particular *kōan** sprang from the mind of Jōshū, ultimately it is what all Buddhas have habitually put into practice with Their whole being. In doing so, They skillfully lead trainees by asking, “Who is the One in Charge?”¹¹ The main points that you need to recognize at present are the principles that a cypress tree in the courtyard does not refer to a concrete object and that ‘a cypress tree’ is not one particular person. This is why, when the monk said, “Venerable Monk, pray, do not use some physical object to point it out to a person like me,” Jōshū replied, “I am not pointing it out to you by using a physical object.” What venerable monk is limited to being a ‘venerable monk’? Because he is not so limited, he will be Jōshū’s ‘I’. And what I is limited to being that ‘I’? And even if he were so limited, he would still be referring to a person. And what physical object would not be limited by Bodhidharma’s intention of coming from the West, since a physical object must certainly have been what he intended by coming from the West?¹² Even so, his intention in coming from the West was not dependent on some physical object, nor was it necessarily for the Wondrous Heart of Nirvana, which is the Treasure House of the Eye of the True Teaching, that the Ancestral Master came from the West. Nor was it for someone’s heart or mind, or for a Buddha, or for some concrete thing.

Now, “What did our Ancestral Master Bodhidharma come from the West for?” was not the monk’s asking some idle question, nor was it a matter of two people being able to see things alike. It was a matter of one person—namely, Jōshū’s monk—who had still not been able to experience a mutual encounter with his Master, so how much could he himself have actually realized?¹³ Or, to put it

10. That is, Bodhidharma came to find a true spiritual friend who, like the metaphorical ‘cypress tree’, would be constant in all adversity.

11. ‘The One in Charge’ is another name for one’s Buddha Nature.

12. That is, Bodhidharma did not come searching for a physical object in the form of a botanical tree. Rather, he came searching for a physical object in the form of a true spiritual friend, and happened to find such a one in the person of Eka.

13. ‘A mutual encounter’ not only refers to a disciple meeting a Master who recognizes him as a

another way, the monk had always been ‘that kind of person’. Therefore, even though he was mistaken time after time, because he was mistaken time after time, he was paying close attention to his mistakes in making mistakes.¹⁴ Would this not be his hearing what is false and his taking its ramifications in hand?

Because his openhearted spirit was devoid of any attachment to duality, the monk was a veritable ‘cypress tree in the courtyard’. When there is no physical object, there can be no ‘cypress tree in the courtyard’. Even though the cypress tree is a physical object, Jōshū said, “I am not pointing it out to you by using a physical object,” and his disciple said, “Venerable Monk, pray, do not use some physical object to point it out to a person like me.” The monk was not like some old ancestral tomb.¹⁵ And because he was not an old tomb to begin with, he was able to bring It forth from where It had been entombed. And because It had been brought forth from where It had been entombed, this was comparable to Jōshū’s saying to his disciple, “Come on, return my efforts!” And because he was saying, in effect, “Come on, show me It!” he said, “I am not pointing it out to you by using a physical object, so, come on, show It to me!” Well, what will the monk use to point it out with? It could be by his responding, “I am also like this.”



There was a monk who asked Great Master Jōshū, “Does a cypress tree also have Buddha Nature?”

The Great Master replied, “Yes, he has.”

The monk then asked, “When does such a tree realize Buddhahood?”

The Great Master replied, “He waits for the Empty Sky to come down to earth.”

The monk then asked, “And when does the Empty Sky come down to earth?”

The Great Master said, “It waits for a cypress tree to realize Buddhahood.”

worthy vessel for the Dharma, but it also refers to the mutual recognition of each other’s Buddha Nature, that is, ‘Buddha recognizes Buddha, and Buddha bows to Buddha’.

14. That is, a disciple who is a genuine vessel for the Dharma will persist in making mistakes through misunderstanding what the Master is pointing to until he sees where he is wrong, which he can only do by being willing to make mistakes in the first place.
15. That is, the monk was not spiritually dead to begin with.

Listen to what the Great Master is saying now, and do not disregard what that monk is asking. The Great Master's phrases, "when the Empty Sky comes down to earth" and "when a cypress tree realizes Buddhahood," do not express their mutually waiting for each other. It is the monk's asking about a cypress tree, about Buddha Nature, about 'the time when', about the Empty Sky, and about coming down to earth.

Now, by the Great Master's responding to the monk, "Yes, he has," he means that the Buddha Nature of a cypress tree does exist. By penetrating into what he is saying, you will penetrate into the meaning of the bloodline of the Buddhas and Ancestors. Saying that Buddha Nature exists in a so-called 'cypress tree' is saying something that cannot be expressed with conventional ways of speaking, nor had it ever yet been so expressed. A cypress tree already has Buddha Nature, so we need to clarify this state of affairs. Since he has Buddha Nature, we should inquire into how high a cypress tree is, how long his lifespan, what the measurements of his body are, and we should hear about his species and his lineage. Further, are the hundreds of thousands of cypress trees all of the same species or are they of different bloodlines? Can there be cypress trees that realize Buddhahood, and cypress trees that are doing the training and practice, and cypress trees that have awakened to the enlightened Mind? Though a cypress tree may have realized Buddhahood, will he not be equipped with such things as training and practice or will he not have an awakening to the enlightened Mind? And, pray, what are the causes and coexisting conditions that connect a cypress tree and the Empty Sky? If a cypress tree's becoming Buddha is indeed the time when "I am awaiting Your coming down to earth," is the merit of a cypress tree invariably synonymous with the Empty Sky? In regard to the status of a cypress tree, we need to do our utmost to explore in detail whether Empty Space is the tree's initial position or his ultimate status. Let me put it to you, dear old Jōshū, is it because you too were a withered cypress tree that you could breathe such life into these matters?

In summary, a cypress tree's having Buddha Nature is beyond the realm of non-Buddhists or those of the two Lower Courses,* and the like, and is something that academic teachers of Scripture and those who compose scholarly commentaries have not encountered or heard about. And how much less could it be presented by the flowery speech of some dead tree or some heap of cold ashes! Simply, it is only those of Jōshū's species who explore the Matter thoroughly through their training.

Now, as to a cypress tree having Buddha Nature, which Jōshū expressed, is a cypress tree limited by being called 'a cypress tree', and is Buddha Nature limited by being called 'Buddha Nature'? This expression of Jōshū's is not something that

a single Buddha or even two Buddhas have thoroughly exhausted. Even someone with the countenance of a Buddha would not necessarily be able to thoroughly exhaust what he expressed. Even among Buddhas, there may be Buddhas who express it and there may be Buddhas who cannot express it.

The phrase ‘waiting for the Empty Sky to come down to earth’ does not describe something that cannot happen, since every time a cypress tree realizes Buddhahood, the Empty Sky comes down to earth. Its coming down to earth is not concealed, but rather it is louder than even a hundred thousand rolls of thunder. When a cypress tree realizes Buddhahood, it will not only be within the twenty-four hours of some day, but it will also be within the time that surpasses any day’s twenty-four hours.¹⁶ The Empty Sky that comes down to earth is not only the empty sky that is seen by ordinary people or saintly ones. There is an Empty Sky in addition to the empty sky. It is something that others do not see, but which Jōshū himself encountered. The Earth which the Empty Sky comes down to is also not the earth that ordinary people or saintly ones inhabit, for there is also an Earth apart from that. It is not something that darkness or light reaches, and it was reached by Jōshū all alone. At the time when the Empty Sky comes down to Earth, even the Sun and Moon, even the Mountains and Rivers will have been waiting for It. Who says that Buddha Nature must invariably realize Buddhahood? Buddha Nature is a splendid decoration that comes after realizing Buddhahood. Thus, a cypress tree and Buddha Nature are not different notes in the same tune.¹⁷ In other words, They are indefinable, so we need to explore Them by asking, “What are They like?”

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Ejō

16. That is, it not only occurs within time (the twenty-four hours of a day) but goes beyond time (in the original text, this was expressed as ‘the twenty-six hours of a day’).

17. That is, they are not different words for the same thing.