

On Why Our Ancestral Master Came from the West

(Soshi Seirai I)

Translator's Introduction: This short discourse focuses on the question that each trainee is presumably keeping in mind at all times: why have I come to train? This is the spiritual question that permeates everything that the trainee is doing. It is what the trainee needs to get his teeth into and to hold onto, like someone holding onto the branch of a tree with his mouth as he dangles over a thousand foot cliff. It is the Great Matter of life and death, the willingness to risk life and limb in order to realize the Truth.

Great Master Kyōgen Chikan was a Dharma heir of Great Master Isan Reiyū. He once said to his assembly, “Imagine someone climbing up a tree at the edge of a thousand-foot-high cliff.¹ He grabs hold of a branch with his mouth, since he cannot get a hold with his feet and he is unable to pull himself up with his hands. Just at that moment, a man at the bottom of the tree asks him, ‘Why did Bodhidharma come from the West?’ At such a time, were he to open his mouth to answer the man, he would lose his grip and forfeit his life. Were he not to answer, he would make a mistake due to the nature of what was asked.² Speak up! What, for goodness sake, should he do at such a time?”

At that moment, a novice monk named Kotō Shō came forth from the assembly and said, “I have no question about the time when the man has gone up the tree but, Venerable Monk, please tell me, what about the time before he has climbed the tree?”

The Master thereupon broke out in uproarious laughter.

Although this dialogue has sparked many discussions and commentaries, few of them have expressed its essence. I am afraid that people, by and large, have been bewildered by it. Even so, in thinking about it, if you make use of ‘not deliberately thinking about it’, as well as of ‘not deliberately thinking about anything’, your

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1. ‘Climbing a tree’ is a metaphor for doing one’s training and practice.
 2. That is, by not answering a spiritual question, he would be acting contrary to the Bodhisattva vow to spiritually help all sentient beings.

efforts on your meditation cushion will naturally be like those of our dear old friend Kyōgen.³ When you sit as still as a mountain on your own cushion, as our dear friend Kyōgen has already done, you too will be exploring this dialogue in detail with him, even though he has not yet opened his mouth. Not only will you be making free use of our dear Kyōgen's Eye to look upon the dialogue, but you will also be using It to break through and see the meaning of Shakyamuni Buddha's Treasure House of the Eye of the True Teaching.



Imagine someone climbing up a tree at the edge of a thousand-foot-high cliff.

We need to thoroughly explore these words in a quiet manner. Who is it that he is calling a 'someone'? We should not say that whoever is not a temple pillar* must necessarily be called 'a piece of lumber'. Even though it was the exalted face of the Buddha along with the face of our Great Ancestor Makakashō that broke into smiles, we should not overlook the fact that we ourselves, as well as others, can also experience this mutual recognition. The place where the person was climbing up the tree was not the whole of the great earth, nor was it the top of a hundred-foot pole. It was a thousand-foot-high cliff. Even should the climber fall off the tree, it would still be within the context of a thousand-foot-high cliff. There are times when one falls and there are times when one climbs. In saying "Imagine someone climbing up a tree at the edge of a thousand-foot-high cliff," we need to recognize that we are saying that there is a time when one is climbing. During that time, the climber is a thousand feet up and it is a thousand feet down. It is a thousand feet on the left and it is a thousand feet on the right. It is also a thousand feet from here and a thousand feet from there. Such a climber, as well as the tree being climbed, is also a thousand feet. The foregoing thousand feet will be just like this. Were you to ask me, "Just how much is a thousand feet," I would answer, "It is like the diameter of the Old Mirror, like the width of the Fireplace, or like the height of a monk's Seamless Stupa."⁴

3. The two methods Dōgen is recommending derive from a narrative concerning Abbot Yakusan Igen, which Dōgen quotes at the beginning of Discourse 26: On Wanshi's 'Kindly Advice for Doing Seated Meditation' (*Zazen Shin*).

* See *Glossary*.

4. That is, like the three examples, it is beyond measure. The 'Old Mirror' refers to the whole universe which, although limitless, constantly reflects the activity of our own mind. The 'Fireplace' is immeasurable because, when the fires of karmic consequence arise, the size of



He grabs hold of a branch with his mouth.

Just what is this ‘mouth’? Even if we do not know the expanse of the whole Mouth itself, we may, just for the present, discover the whereabouts of the Mouth by moving along a branch of the tree, thoroughly exploring the branch by nipping off its leaves. It may be that by the very act of gripping the branch of the tree, his Mouth has taken form. Consequently, the whole of his Mouth is the tree: the whole of the tree is his Mouth. His whole body, through and through, is his Mouth: his whole Mouth, through and through, is his body. Because the tree already has a hold on itself, the Master said that the man’s feet could not get a hold on the tree, which is like saying that the man’s feet could not get a hold on his own feet. Because the branches are pulling themselves up with their branches, the Master said that the man was unable to pull himself up with his hands, which is like his saying that the man’s hands were pulling his own hands up. Even so, his feet still go forward and back, and his hands still make a fist and open a fist.⁵ Now, people may well think of the man as dangling in space, but how could dangling in space be an improvement on grabbing hold of a branch with his Mouth?



Just at that moment, a man at the bottom of the tree asks him,
“Why did Bodhidharma come from the West?”

To say that there was a person at the bottom of the tree at that moment is as if the Master had said that there was a person who was inside the tree, as if there was something called a ‘human tree’. To say that underneath the climber at that very moment there was a human being who was asking a question would be to express that very thing. Accordingly, it is ‘a tree asking a tree’ and ‘a man asking a man’. It is ‘the whole tree itself asking the whole question’ and ‘the whole intent behind Bodhidharma coming from the West’ asking ‘why he came from the West’. The one who is asking the question is the very Mouth grabbing hold of a branch and then asking. If the Mouth were not grabbing hold of the branch, there could be no asking of a question, nor any voice to fill the mouth, nor any mouth that was filled

the fireplace is irrelevant in the face of the pain experienced. In construction and sewing, measurements are made along the seams of an object; therefore, a ‘Seamless Stupa’ is beyond our ability to measure.

5. That is, even though the trainee may not yet have awakened fully, he may still be able to give expression to the Truth.

with speech. When we truly ask why Bodhidharma came from the West, we ask by getting our teeth into why he came from the West.



Were he to open his mouth to answer the man, he would lose his grip and forfeit his life.

Now you need to become intimately familiar with the words, “Were he to open his mouth to answer the man, he would lose his grip and forfeit his life.” It sounds at first as if the man could actually answer the other without opening his mouth. If this were really the case, he would not lose his grip and forfeit his life. Even though he has the choice between opening his mouth and not opening it, this choice will not interfere with his Mouth’s ability to grab hold of the tree branch. Opening and closing are not necessarily the only functions of the Mouth, and the mouth is capable of both opening and closing. Thus, grabbing hold of the branch is the everyday behavior of our whole Mouth and it will not interfere with the mouth’s opening and closing. Is ‘opening one’s mouth to answer another’ the same as ‘disgorging the tree branch to answer another’ or the same as ‘disclosing the intent behind Bodhidharma’s coming from the West to answer another’? If the climber does not disclose the intent behind ‘Bodhidharma’s coming from the West’ in order to answer another, then he is not answering the question that was asked.

Not to have answered another is to grasp hold of life with one’s whole being; it cannot be called ‘losing one’s grip and forfeiting one’s life’.⁶ And if one has already released his grip and forfeited his life, there will not be any answering of the question. Even so, Kyōgen’s heart did not refuse to answer others; in all likelihood he had already loosened his grip and forfeited his life. Keep in mind that when we refuse to answer others, we are protecting ourselves and holding onto our life. When we answer in a flash, we turn ourselves around spiritually and activate our True Life. Clearly, what fills the mouth of each and every person is the Truth. We should answer others, and we should answer ourselves; we should ask others, and we should ask ourselves. This is our Mouth holding onto the Truth, for it is our Mouth holding onto the Truth that Kyōgen calls ‘holding onto the branch’. When you give your answer to others, you open the Mouth within your mouth. If you do not answer them, even though this may not be in accord with what they are asking, it will be in accord with what you yourself are asking.

So, you need to realize that all the Buddhas and Ancestors have both asked and answered the question as to why Bodhidharma came from the West, and They

6. That is, it cannot be called ‘dropping off body and mind’.

have all experienced the moment of being up a tree holding onto a branch with Their Mouth, and They all continue to give the answer.



The Venerable Abbot Setchō Jūken once said in verse:

*It is easy to speak while high up a tree,
It is hard to speak while beneath a tree,
This old monk has climbed that tree,
So come on, ask your question!*

Now, in response to his “Come on, ask your question!” it would be so sad if you were to employ all your strength and then ask your question too late, for your question will have come after his answer. Let me ask all the old sharp ones of past and present, “Is Kyōgen’s uproarious laughter what he uttered whilst up the tree, or is it what he uttered whilst beneath the tree? Does it answer why Bodhidharma came from the West or not?” Let’s see if you can give it a try!

Delivered to the assembly on the fourth day of the second lunar month in the second year of the Kangen era (March 14, 1244), whilst deep in the mountains of Echizen Province.

Copied on the twenty-second day of the sixth lunar month in the second year of the Kōan era (August 2, 1279), whilst at Eihei-ji Monastery on Mount Kichijō.