

A Thousand Miles the Same Mood

The first case of the Wumen Kuan is 'Mu', and the first case of the Blue Cliff Record is 'Bodhidharma's Great Emptiness'. It's as fine a way as any of approaching Mu. Every koan picks up the light of Mu, the first great gateless gate, which is your first encounter with the vast fact that there is no barrier, no impediment, that everything gives Way.

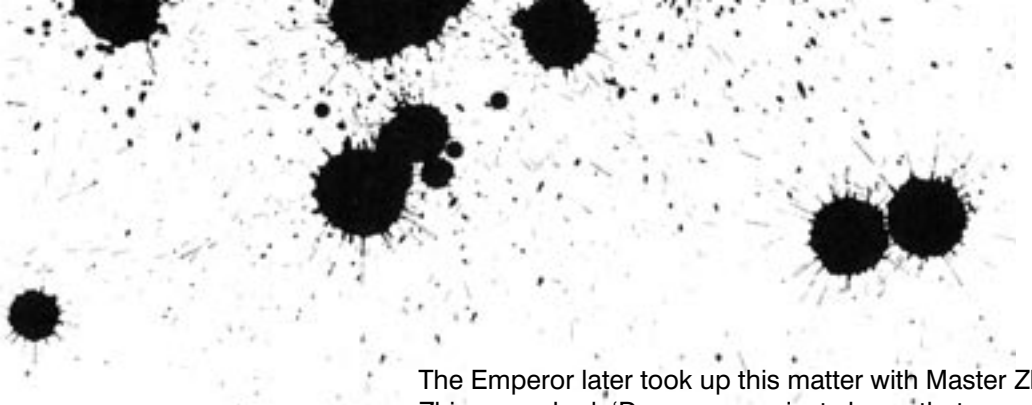
The people we meet in the first case of the Blue Cliff Record are Bodhidharma and the Emperor Wu of Liang. Bodhidharma, ancestor in the Dharma of all Chan teachers, was newly arrived from India at this point. The encounter with Emperor Wu was perhaps his first formal engagement after his three year journey from India into China. Fresh from India with a big bushy red beard, something that nobody else in China had, hence he was known as the red-bearded barbarian. Barbarian in more ways than one – it turns out he had no Chinese manners whatsoever. He was in fact the 28th teacher in the lineage from the Buddha and he's taken as the founding teacher of Ch'an, which became Zen, Buddhism.

This was happening about 500 years after Buddhism had begun to percolate through, by way of trade and travel, from India into Chinese culture. But it is Bodhidharma who initiates in that tradition a profound insistence upon direct experience of great emptiness, which cuts away all other formalities and pretty much burns down the cornfield. That is Bodhidharma's Buddhist legacy to China, and to us. His encounter was with a most interesting emperor, Emperor Wu, whose 47 year reign lasted from 500 to 549, Common Era, down in the south of China in Liang province. He was popularly known as the Imperial Bodhisattva – I hear a slight contradiction in that title, don't you? – to mark the fact that he was a great benefactor of Buddhism. He was responsible for endowing hundreds of temples and monasteries and sometimes giving his own personal treasure to found a monastery. In other words, he might have thought he had acquired a certain amount of merit as one who was sincerely dedicated to opening the Way.

And indeed the encounter that we come across in Case One of the Blue Cliff Record actually begins with a direct question about merit from the Emperor, a question which is not included in the Case. Emperor Wu said, 'I have endowed hundreds of monasteries and temples and endorsed the ordination of thousands of monks and nuns. What is my merit?' Bodhidharma replied, 'No merit, no merit at all'. Now dana was extremely well established as the first and greatest of the paramitas, or perfections, the one from which all the others seem to flow. And that's what's behind the next question, which is the first question of the Case. I'll read you the case right through and then we'll come back to it bit by bit. Mercifully, says Bodhidharma, no-merit is abundant everywhere. Have you seen this yet, Emperor? Obviously he had not, as we see from his next question, which initiates the Case.

Emperor Wu of Lian asked Bodhidharma 'What is the first principle of the holy teaching?' In other words, he asks, 'Then what is the first principle of the holy teaching, if it is not dana?' Bodhidharma said, 'Vast emptiness, nothing holy.' The Emperor said, 'Who is this person confronting me?' Bodhidharma said, 'I do not know.' The Emperor could not reach an accord with this.

Bodhidharma then crossed the river and went on his way – that's the Yangtse River. According to legend he crossed that immense river on a single reed. And he went on to Wei, which is in Hunan province in Western China. In other words, the far side of the moon from Emperor Wu.



The Emperor later took up this matter with Master Zhigong, who was his spiritual adviser. Zhigong asked, 'Does your majesty know that person yet?' The Emperor said, 'I don't know him.' Zhigong said, 'That was the Bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara conveying the Mind Seal of the Buddha.' The Emperor felt regretful and at once sought to have a messenger dispatched to urge him to return. Zhigong said, 'There is no use in sending such a messenger. Even if everyone in China went after him, he would not return.'

So the encounter recorded in this case begins with Bodhidharma's extraordinarily uncompromising reply to the question 'What is the first principle of the holy teaching?' *Vast emptiness, nothing holy.* Hardly a cloud in the sky up there, and the wind's in the trees. Currawongs are celebrating the fact of being.


This uncompromising reply has echoed down through the entire tradition. Zhaozhou's uncompromising reply to a monk's question, 'Does a monk have Buddha nature?' resonates with Bodhidharma. He replied even more simply, 'Mu' - 'No'. No having or not having, if you really dare to look. No monk or Zhaozhou. The great amplitude of this fact. What we are facing – at every moment of our lives, in fact, whatever we may think or dream up about it – is just this barrier of emptiness.

Wuzu, teacher of Yuanwu who compiled the Blue Cliff Record, said this about 'Vast emptiness, nothing holy': 'If you can just see into this vast emptiness, nothing holy, then you can return home and sit in peace.' Return home. Sit in peace. It's vast like the night sky last night blazing with stars, blazing with ten billion bright particulars. And don't be misled by 'nothing holy', don't fail to hear the fire running through it.

There is a fire that runs through all things and 'nothing holy' is the road to seeing it. Curiously if nothing indeed is holy, then everything is endowed with completeness, sacredness; everything matters. There is nothing that is not sacred. All is blessed. Everything counts.

Can you feel how this is so? Where does it leave you in the actual living of your life? What does it mean when you are wrestling with a particularly dirty pot in the washing up? What about dealing with a work colleague? A difficult work colleague? How can this 'nothing holy' be a blessing upon that interaction. If nothing is holy, then what is your freedom at such a moment? How are you unimpeded in the most essential way? And what, then, is right action? When dealing with that most difficult person in the world, your partner, how do you meet this 'nothing holy'? How do you meet this quality of It is Unknown. *There is Unknownness, right here.*

This becomes more acute next moment when the Emperor says, 'Who is this person confronting me?' This obdurate person, this unfettered human being? The Emperor Wu was not affronted, I sense, but deeply curious: 'Then who are you?' What manner of being human do you present? And Bodhidharma replies, 'I do not know'. Like the note in the wind, in the breeze right here right now, you will be able to hear that this is again a great blessing. This enormously open position: I do not know. In such a condition there is no merit. There is no first principle. There is no teaching, no emperor, no sage. There is nothing holy. There is nothing at all. There is a sense of 'I am unknown to my deepest self', the 'I' falls away as unknowable. And surely every one of you has stumbled on that first inkling of the plain fact that you are unknown, that you are unknowable, and that this is a vast dimension in you and every detail of your life – everything holy has its lodging there and every joy is connected to it. We are that unknown. It is our most intimate fact.



Robert Aitken turns Wuzu's words slightly, to comment, 'Unless you can acknowledge I don't know to the very bottom, you can never return home and sit at ease in peace. Instead you will live your life to the very end in meaningless yackety yackety yack.'

Later on the Emperor is asked by Master Zhigong, 'Do you know that person yet?' – that one who flashed past you, so near and yet so far away – and Wu said, 'I don't know him.' It's very important to feel for the difference between Bodhidharma's 'I don't know' and Wu's 'I don't know'. There is great honesty in Wu's 'I don't know him', and there is the beginning of intimacy in that honesty, a door opening. But one 'I don't know' has infinite provenance to be found within it, and the other is not yet aware of its presence.

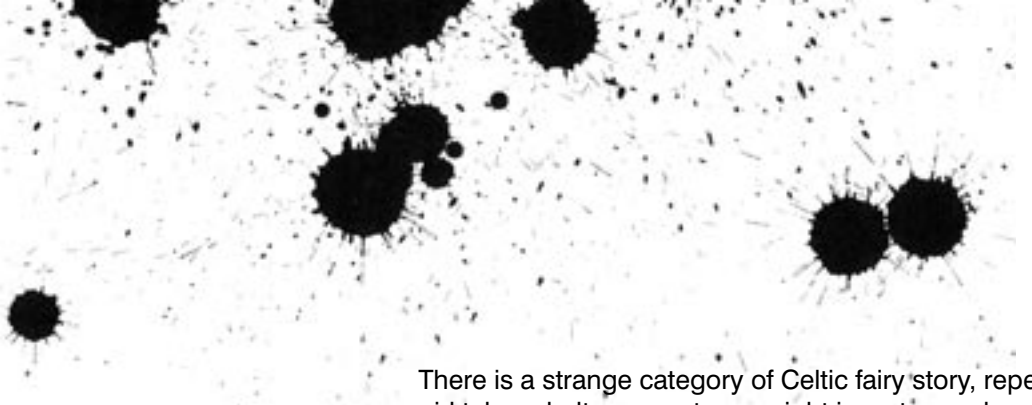
Later on, the Emperor Wu, hearing of Bodhidharma's death, inscribed a monument with the words 'Alas, I saw him without seeing him. I met him without meeting him. I encountered him without encountering him. Now as before I regret this deeply.' Now as before I recognise the true extent of yackety yackety yack in my life. The moment he hears from Zhi Gong that this had been compassion itself speaking directly to him, conveying the Mind Seal of the Buddha, he immediately 'felt regret' – a most delicate understatement. He immediately knew that he had missed it. It had rolled over and shown its belly and he had not been looking. And he said, 'Send them out, bring him back!' As an Emperor, you can say things like that. But even an Emperor could not make Bodhidharma come or go. Zhi Gong said, 'No, even if all the people in China went after him, there's no coming back.' No coming or going, nothing holy, no-one to be lost, no-one to be found. So nothing to attach an order to at all, sadly. Nothing for a thousand miles but tremendous freedom.

That freedom took the red-bearded barbarian to an old run down ruin of a temple that wasn't actually fit for habitation, so he adopted it as his and took up residence in a cave behind the temple. And there he sat for nine years facing the cave wall in deep zazen. Eventually three or four disciples gathered around him. One was an unknown woman, another one of the unknown women, no name. A great name, that – 'no name'. At large in the unknown. And among them was Huike, who became the second ancestor, who gave rise to the third ancestor and the fourth and so on down through all the founding teachers, as they were called then. Some said Bodhidharma faced the wall because he didn't know any Chinese. But if you've sat for a little while you'll know he faced the wall because he was prepared to face himself. Unimpeded, unafraid. Clear right through, no front, no back.

Yunmen in a very different moment some six hundred years later was asked by a monk, 'What is the Tao?' That's a bit like saying 'What is Buddha?', or 'What is self nature?' Which is to ask, 'Who am I really?' What is the Tao? Yunmen said, 'To break through this word.' The monk then said 'What is it like when one has broken through?' And Yunmen said, 'A thousand miles the same mood.'

Perhaps that's a clue to why there was no bringing Bodhidharma back. He travelled on for a thousand miles. 'A thousand miles the same mood.' What is that one great mood that you realize when you are not in your own way? There is another koan which says 'A thousand mountains are covered in snow. Why is one peak not white?' A thousand miles the same vast mood, and yet one Bodhidharma, so unrepeatable, red beard, barbarian and all? Look at us. We're also unrepeatable. Never will be seen again. None of us. Nothing like us.

So you can see that in the company of Bodhidharma, we're very much in the territory of the koan that asks us simply to break through this one word 'Mu', to admit ourselves fully and completely to Mu. So how do we do it? Every mindful breath is an approach to the gate of Mu. So breathe Mu, let it soften and take your thoughts away, just fast your mind on Mu, for it will provide all that you have ever needed. And fasten your heart on Mu.



There is a strange category of Celtic fairy story, repeated in many forms, in which a young girl takes shelter on a stormy night in a strange house, and the people there have a corpse laid out in the front room.

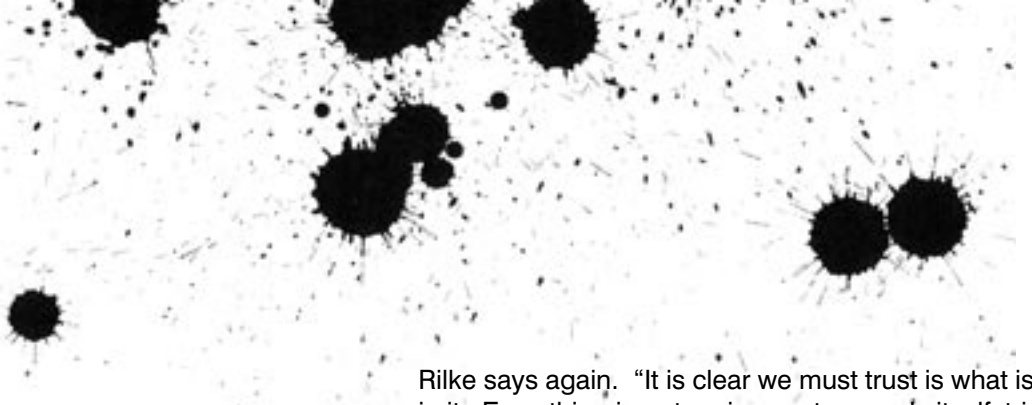
It is the body of a man who has died, and the young girl is granted shelter on condition that she sits up and watches the body all night. She agrees that whatever happens, she will never take her eyes off the body. So when that man's body suddenly sits up, stares at her, and flies out of the window, she goes with him, clinging on for dear life. He plunges through seas, he thunders across moors, he dives into rivers, he flings himself over mountains, and she never lets go. She has fastened her heart on this unknown business. And at the end of this truly amazing night, they come back to where they began, and she finds that she has, by her absolute fidelity to the task, released him from a spell. He can show her his true face. You could also say she has released herself, when his true face becomes clear to her. It is the face of unconditioned love, and nothing is missing anywhere in the world.

So the business of Mu is the task of lovingly keeping watch over a difficult question, through all the long night and wild journey. It is the business of learning trying how to love a slippery, ungraspable question – a question exactly as slippery and ungraspable as you are. If you can learn how to love the inexplicable nature of this question Mu, you have reconciled with yourself. What is Mu? What is this strange untranslatable word? Why is it the way through? How? How? Knock, knock – come to the gate and knock. Let your heart knock. Let your heart fasten on. Great life may well be worth the price of admission, the one we usually call 'suffering' .

Rilke says in his Letters to a Young Poet: 'This is in the end the only kind of courage that is required of us. The courage to face the strangest most unusual most inexplicable experiences that can meet us.' And Mu is certainly of that category. Inexplicable, strange, unusual, and yet wholly familiar. Wholly familiar. Your family of origin, in fact.

Live Mu, live the question 'What is Mu?' in any way that you can discover. And you will live your way all the way in. Every path to this gateless gate is different. There is not one that has ever repeated itself. You are the first theory of Mu in the universe. Your path to Mu is its own theory of Mu. Find your way. Break through this word. Live your way into the answer to the question, 'What is Mu?' Trust that this question arises out of necessity. It's the necessity to go into your own nature as far as you can go, and to see how deep is the place from which you spring, from which your life flows, and how strange is the place from which your life flows. Great emptiness. Nothing holy. This trust, this courage depends on a certain kind of unquestioning fidelity, on a sense that there's something stored up in you as your forgotten legacy, your long-forgotten inheritance. It belongs to nobody but you. It's a blessing so large that you can travel as far as you wish without every having to step out of it. A thousand miles the same Mu.

Trust the apparent difficulty of Mu. Trust it. That very difficulty is its own gold-clad guarantee. The general bent of human life – the general technological, itching, searching, bent of it – seems mainly to be a hopeful search for the easy, the dream of finding the easiest side of the easy. But there's nobody on earth who doesn't secretly know that the greatest experiences of life blossom from the difficult, not the easy and the comfortable. We're all artists of ourselves, and we know it and artists know it – the difficult is where you go. That's where the juice is. Creativity begins in exactly the right impossibility.



Rilke says again. "It is clear we must trust is what is difficult. Everything alive trusts in it. Everything in nature is spontaneously itself, tries to grow and be itself against all opposition.' So human lives are only barely large enough for the reality of this one word Mu, when all the locks click open. My favourite Japanese filmmaker Yasuhiro Ozu has inscribed on his gravestone just that one word Mu, no other particulars at all, no dates, no name, just that one word. You could say that the dead have melted back into that one same mood a thousand miles. The unborn too are there in timeless accord. We come and go from it a thousand times a day, before we go back in, if we let practice grow us aware enough to know it.

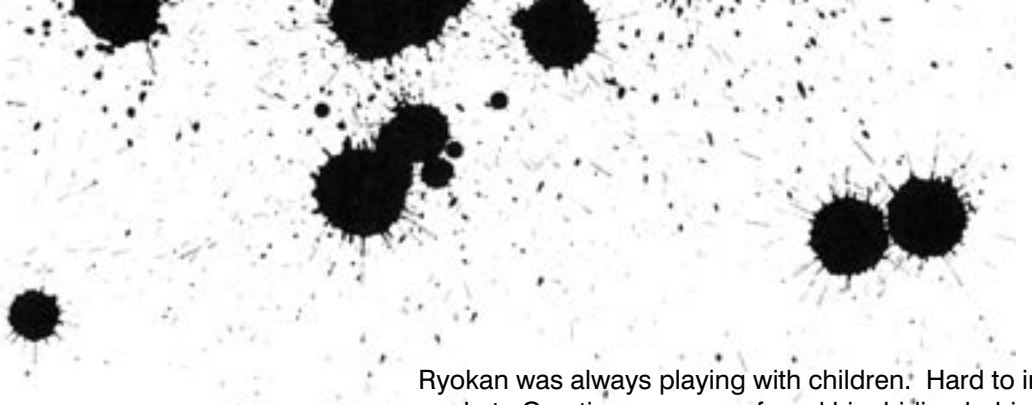
In searching for Mu, look right where you are, obviously. Where else in the universe is there to be or to look? Look right where you are and maintain the bare and simple attention that sesshin provides for you. If you trust in the small things that are so easily overlooked they can suddenly become huge, immeasurable, clear, one great shout of your own self-nature. Serve the small things with confidence and let them confide in you. They can be so strange. It can be a key dropping on to the table. The bite of an apple. Watch out for the bite of an apple, it can be very painful. It can be a sneeze. It can be the music of pebbles as you walk, the sound of your own footsteps, the passage of a leaf from a tree. Just in one small face of it you can find Bodhidharma's 'Vast emptiness, nothing holy'. When you're not separate, the whole universe can wake up in just that articulation of what is.

So Mu is like placing a stone in your shoe. It goes with you everywhere. You never forget its presence. It irritates you badly at times. That's OK. Or perhaps it's like losing a filling in your tooth. Your tongue goes to it all the time and marvels at the crater it has just discovered. That's Mu. Mu is as close and intimate and vast as that.

You can't will yourself through this barrier. You can't cross the barrier at all, because it is no barrier at all, when you realize it. But suddenly it will be crossed. It will be crossed. It happens that way. If you approach the gate again and again with a simple sincerity, you will be flung through by some mistake which is also called a miracle. Mu is not a metaphysics that you can read in books or that your mind can grapple. It is nowhere but in living beings and in the life of stones and trees and clouds. So please just keep coming up to the gate of the mystery. The gate of your life, of your next breath, this breath. To find vast emptiness, just embrace the small and the near. It's so simple that it presents an almost scandalous barrier to the kind of mind we've learned to build to house the ego.

I'll end with a little poem by Ryokan. Ryokan is that lovely playful monk whose life is simplicity itself. Ryokan said:

In all Ten Directions of the universe
There is only one truth.
When we see clearly
the great teachings are the same.
What could ever be lost?
What could be attained?
If we attain something
it was there from the beginning of time.
If we lost something
it is hiding somewhere near us. Near.
Look this ball in my pocket
Can you see how priceless it is?



Ryokan was always playing with children. Hard to imagine him without a ball in his pocket. One time someone found him hiding behind a tree, long after dark, long after all the children had been called in from the game of hide and seek to their baths and their suppers. But Ryokan wasn't letting anybody down. The person came up to him and said, 'Ryokan, what's going on?' Ryokan turned, and smiled, and put his finger to his lips, and said, 'Shhhh'. Always at play in the dark of Mu.

And Mu responds well to that spirit of play and laughter. Bodhidharma did not persist with the Emperor Wu. He left him to his path of devotion and study. He saw that he was not yet clear enough to catch the vast laughter. He smiled, and said, 'Shhhh!' and vanished back into the dark.

So please join the zazen of this long beautiful afternoon. Each moment, that's the gate. There's nothing lacking in the universe.

Thank you very much.