

CHAN TALKS

by the Venerable Chan Master Hua

III) How Bodhidharma Saved the Parrot

Investigating Dhyana is the wonderfully subtle mind-seal Dharma door transmitted by Shakyamuni Buddha on Vulture Peak. On that occasion, the Buddha twirled a golden flower in his hand and emitted a subtle smile. All the gods and humans in the assembly did not know what was going on, but the Venerable Mahakashyapa also cracked a subtle smile. That marked the first transmission of the Dharma door of the "mind-sealing-the-mind" (以心印心); from thence it was passed down from patriarch through the successive generations.

Mahakashyapa was well over one hundred years old at that time. He was a cultivator of ascetic practices who always spurred himself on to work hard, and he would certainly not smile without reason. The reason for his emitting a subtle smile in response to the Buddha's smile was that he had received the mind-seal transmission.

After Shakyamuni Buddha transmitted the mind-seal dharma to the first patriarch, Mahakashyapa, Mahakashyapa transmitted it to the second patriarch, Ananda. Ananda transmitted it to the third patriarch Sanakavasa, and Sanakavasa in turn transmitted it to the fourth patriarch Upagupta. Thus the mind-seal was transmitted from patriarch until it reached Bodhidharma, the 28th patriarch in India. Bodhidharma saw that the root-nature of the Indian people at that time was not ripe for this great teaching. At the same time he saw that the people of China were ready for the Great Vehicle Teaching. And so the Patriarch set sail for China, and arrived at Gwangtung (Canton) in 527 A.D. Therefore, Gwangtung province is also called "The Place of the One Come from the West(西來初地).

At that time, most of the people in Gwangtung had not yet received the Great Vehicle Teaching, and they failed to recognize Bodhidharma. They called him "malaccha," which is a derogatory term they used for the Indian people. Then Bodhidharma headed for Nanjing, wishing to teach and transform Dharma Master Shen Gwang ("Spiritual Light"). Dharma Master Shen Gwang was lecturing the sutras in Nanjing. He had such unimpeded eloquence that when he spoke, celestial flowers fell from the heavens and golden lotuses welled up from the earth.

Bodhidharma asked Dharma Master Shen Gwang, "Why are you lecturing on the sutras?"

"I am teaching people to end birth and death."

"Oh?" said Bodhidharma, "Exactly how do you do that? In this sutra, the words are black and the paper is white. How does this teach people to end birth and death?"

When Dharma Master Shen Gwang heard that, he was very upset. He felt that Bodhidharma was slandering the Triple Jewel. In a fit of anger, he whipped out his heavy iron beads and cracked Bodhidharma across the mouth, knocking loose two of his teeth. In ancient times many people knew the martial arts, and Buddhist monks were no exception. Since they couldn't carry weapons on their persons, many of them sported heavy iron recitation beads which could double up as a weapon. They could lash out at an aggressor if the occasion called for it.

There is a legend about teeth of holy men. It says that if a sage's teeth fall to the ground, it won't rain for three years, and as a result, many people would starve to death in that area. Although Bodhidharma had two of his teeth knocked out, he couldn't bear to see the people suffer on his account. Therefore, he did not let his teeth fall on the ground. Instead he swallowed them, and disappeared down the road. From that incident there came to be a proverb in China, "If your teeth get knocked out, swallow them."

Since Bodhidharma did not obtain any response from Dharma Master Shen Gwang, he traveled towards Sung Moun tain in Henan Province. On the road he met a parrot imprisoned in a wicker cage. The parrot recognized the Patriarch and asked him,

"Mind from the West,
Mind from the West,
Teach me a way to escape from this cage."

Bodhidharma taught the parrot an expedient way to get out of the cage:

"To escape from the cage,
To escape from the cage:
Put out both legs, and close both eyes.
That is the way to escape from the cage!"

The parrot listened and immediately understood. Then he stuck out his legs, closed his eyes, and played dead. When the bird's owner came home from work, he went to the cage, took one look, and exclaimed, "What happened to my parrot?"

He was very upset. He pulled open the cage door and scooped up the bird, which lay still and quiet in his hand. The owner was puzzled, "The bird's body is inert, yet it has not yet chilled. Is my parrot really dead?" As he was musing over this problem, he slowly opened his hand..... Right at that instant, the bird broke loose from his owner's hand and flew away! That was how the parrot gained his freedom.

This story should act as a point of reference for us: Who among us isn't like the parrot, imprisoned in a cage all day long? Although we have food to eat, we are not free from birth and death. In fact, we are born muddled and die confused, and we never get to clearly see our original face. If we wish to be truly free from birth and death, then first and foremost, we have to pretend to be dead people, even when we are still alive. As the saying goes,

If you don't want to die,
First you have to put in true and hard work.

In cultivating, you have to genuinely understand where you came from and where you will go. Ask yourself, "Why am I not my own master?"

"Well," You say, "I am my own master. This body belongs to me." If you were truly the master of your own body, why can't you make it stay young and strong forever? People are born. They progress from their youth to their prime, and from their prime they quickly move on to old age and death. If you are truly in control, why can't you stop your body from aging? When your body gets sick, you are no longer in control. How much less are you in control when it comes time to die! Therefore, you must gain a clear understanding of the matter of birth and death.

Arriving in a daze and leaving in sorrow,
You've come to the human realm in vain.

It's not as good as not coming and not going:
Then you won't have happiness or grief."

People are confused when they are born and muddled during the time of death. At the time of death they are overwhelmed with grief and vexation. If you are turned by this kind of state, then your human existence is totally meaningless. Isn't it much better if you could neither come nor go? Then you won't be subject to feelings of joy or sorrow. You will attain true ease and comfort.

We shouldn't allow ourselves to be imprisoned in a cage. What cage? It's the cage of our body, which is a false union of the four elements of earth, water, fire, and air. Our intrinsic Buddhanature is trapped inside the cage of our body, in the same way the parrot is trapped inside his wicker cage. If we wish to get out of the cage, we should learn to be without impediments, without hangups, without care or worry, without afflictions or troubles. This means being able to sit still. For this reason, we are learning to sit in meditation. Everyone has to end his own birth and death. Nobody else can do the work for you. Others can point out the way, but you yourself have to walk the road. If you really wish to get out of the cage, then make sure you work very hard!