"Don't Know" - Blue Cliff Record Case 1

Patrick Kearney · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Patrick Kearney · 45:24

We're talking about "don't know." Tonight's topic, if all goes well, is don't know. So we're going to be Zen-y tonight.

We're looking at the Blue Cliff Record, case one. The Blue Cliff Record is a Song Dynasty collection of koans—stories that are used for meditation in the Chan or Zen traditions. It comes with the story and then an elaborated commentary. This is the opening case of the Blue Cliff Record, and therefore, because it's the first one, it's clearly quite important.

I'll go through the story first and then we'll unpack it.

Emperor Wu of Liang asked Bodhidharma, "What is the highest meaning of the sacred truths?" Bodhidharma replied, "Empty, not sacred." The emperor said, "Who are you?" Bodhidharma replied, "I don't know." The emperor did not understand. Then Bodhidharma crossed the Yangtze River and came to the kingdom of Wei.

Later, the emperor asked Master Chi about this. Master Chi asked, "Does your majesty understand who this man is?" The emperor said, "I don't know." Master Chi said, "He is the Mahasattva Avalokiteshvara, transmitting the Buddha mind seal." The emperor felt regretful, so he wanted to send an emissary to invite Bodhidharma to return. Master Chi said, "Your majesty, don't say that. Even if everyone in the country went after him, he still would not return."

So this is the story. Let's have a look at the characters.

First of all, Bodhidharma. He is regarded as the 28th Indian ancestral teacher of Chan or Zen. Buddhism starts in India and then moves to China, and the Zen sect traces its lineage back to the Buddha. The Buddha, then you have 28 teachers who are part of that lineage. Bodhidharma is the 28th, and then he goes to China and becomes the first Chinese ancestral teacher. So he's extremely important for the Chinese. He lived in what is now Tamil Nadu in the extreme south of the subcontinent, so he went to China by the sea route through Southeast Asia. He arrived in Liang, which was the empire in southern China, in the year 520, according to the traditional dating. At that time, China was divided between a northern Wei Empire, which itself was divided into eastern and western, and in the south, the Liang. So Bodhidharma turns up. He's a distinguished foreign teacher, and he's introduced to the Emperor Wu, who's the founding emperor of this dynasty. And Wu was a devout Buddhist.

Then we have Master Chi, the second character. He's the emperor's personal Dharma teacher, very important in the Buddhist establishment.

Emperor Wu of Liang asked Bodhidharma, "What is the highest meaning of the sacred truths?" Bodhidharma replied, "Empty, not sacred." The emperor said, "Who are you?" Bodhidharma replied, "I don't know."

This is the essence of the encounter between these two men.

Wu, the emperor, was an absolute ruler—a tyrant, we would say. He fought his way to the throne through civil war. He started life as a military man, rose to become a general, and then in the previous dynasty, when it fell apart, Wu ended up the one man standing after all the battles were over. So he becomes the new emperor. He was personally devout as a Buddhist—even, let's face it, superstitious. He ran an administration that was notorious for its corruption among its high officials and members of the royal family, and it was very careless, if not profligate, with the lives of his people.

He's a devout Buddhist, a devout lay Buddhist, and perhaps not a model of how to practice Dharma in one's personal and professional life.

His question—what is the highest meaning of the sacred truths?—reveals what Wu wants: the essence of the teaching. But the problem is that given the way he lives, there's no way he could understand it. He probably thinks he can understand it, because first of all, he is a genuinely learned man who studies the Buddhist texts. He's genuinely devout, and he's bright. So he studies the sacred texts, and he's surrounded by yes-men who are praising his morality and his wisdom. He's probably convinced that he can understand the highest teaching. And here he gets to talk to an exotic foreigner who impresses everyone that he meets. So why not start at the top? What is the meaning of the sacred truths?

Now, this could be a reference to the four truths taught by the Buddha in his first teaching—that's the obvious interpretation for someone coming out of the Theravada tradition. Or from a Mahayana viewpoint, it might refer to the two truths of Mahayana Buddhism, conventional and absolute. But in any event, whatever he's getting at, clearly what he wants is the essence of the teaching. Give me the essence of the teaching.

So Bodhidharma says, "Empty, not sacred."

What has Bodhidharma just done? Basically, he's thrown a bucket of cold water all over the emperor. No learned debate. No congratulations for being such a great patron of Buddhism. Basically: look, forget about anything being sacred—just empty.

Wu, quite understandably, is shocked. Nobody's treated him like this before. What's happening? What's going on? Who is this fellow? Why is he acting like this? And so then comes his second question. This one, unlike the first, is not scripted. He didn't spend any time thinking about it. This arises spontaneously from his heart: Who are you?

Bodhidharma replies, "I don't know."

Put yourself in Wu's position. What can he do with this answer? What is he expected to do with it? Maybe the translator got it wrong—after all, he's speaking through a translator. They're not speaking directly; they have no language in common. Or actually, Bodhidharma would have learned some Chinese in what is now Indonesia. There was a kingdom in that region—Indonesia, Singapore, Malaysia—where Buddhists coming from China would spend two or three years studying Sanskrit before going on to India, and Buddhists coming from India would spend two or three years studying Chinese before heading off to China. So maybe he did speak some Chinese by this stage.

In any event, Wu is still completely confused. Maybe this foreigner is crazy. Maybe he doesn't know who he's talking to. Doesn't he realize this is the emperor?

In any event, Bodhidharma decided that he was wasting his time, and he left.

The sad thing is that Bodhidharma was actually answering Wu's questions. He was treating him very seriously. In Zen terms, Bodhidharma opened his mouth and showed his liver. He gave Wu everything. But as my old teacher Sayadaw U Pandita—from a completely different tradition, conservative Theravada in Burma—once remarked, you can play the sweetest music, but the water buffalo still won't dance. And that's the situation Bodhidharma found himself in.

So he leaves. Later, the emperor brought this up to Master Zhi and asked him about it. Master Zhi asked, "Does your majesty know who this man is?" The emperor said, "I don't know."

So we have another "I don't know." You notice we've got two "I don't knows." Now, this one coming out of Wu—here we see Wu at his best. We see his sincerity appearing out of the morass of his power plays and his violence. He really doesn't know. And he knows that he really doesn't know what's going on. And he's prepared to admit it, even if it makes him look foolish in front of his subjects. So here we get some naive sincerity coming out.

The obvious question, then, is: what's the difference between Wu's "I don't know" and Bodhidharma's "I don't know"? Is there one?

Just to tell a personal story—many years ago when I was in Hawaii doing Zen training with Robert Aitken Roshi, I was working on the first koan, which is Zhaozhou's *mu*, meaning the negative "not" or "no." The interview would be going to see the teacher, the roshi. It's very formal, very Zen, very Japanese. You make your formal bows. And of course, what the roshi wanted to know is: What is *mu*? Show me *mu*. And of course, I had no idea what was going on. So I usually went in there and said, "I don't know." And once we got that out of the way, I liked to ask him questions about how to do the meditation practice.

But one day, I must have been feeling rebellious. What would happen is you have the encounter with the teacher, and when the teacher decided that the interview was over, he'd reach over and ring his bell—tingle, tingle, tingle. That's the sign for you to get out and for the next person to get in. And the interviews were quite brief—bang, bang, bang, bang.

So I go in one day. "So, what's *mu*?" I say, "I don't know." And the roshi is reaching for his bell. And I said, "Wait just a minute. Why is it that when Bodhidharma says 'I don't know,' that's great, but when I say 'I don't know,' it's 'get out of here'?"

And Roshi just paused with his hand over the bell, and he looked me in the eyes and he said, "Patrick, there is a world of difference between Bodhidharma's 'I don't know' and your 'I don't know.'" And he rang the bell, and out I went.

So what is the difference? That is an important question.

Wu is talking to Master Zhi, trying to work out what's going on. Now, Master Zhi is both very learned in Buddhist matters—he's the emperor's teacher, that's the top job—and he's a master of politics, because otherwise he wouldn't be the emperor's teacher. He was also very, very good at extracting money from the state and handing it out to the Buddhist clergy. So he's the man to explain what's really going on in any situation relating to Buddhism.

And Master Zhi, as usual—because that's his job—has an answer. Master Zhi said, "He is the Mahasattva Avalokiteshvara, transmitting the Buddha mind seal."

A mahasattva is a Sanskrit term meaning "great being," a high-ranking bodhisattva. In Mahayana Buddhism, this means a being who's on the way to becoming a Buddha and is so close to being a Buddha that, in effect, the difference doesn't count. So you have these great bodhisattva mahasattvas in the Mahayana pantheon, and they're like gods—functionally equivalent to Buddhas.

And the particular bodhisattva that Zhi says Bodhidharma is, is Avalokiteshvara, who is the bodhisattva of compassion. Question: Who's the bodhisattva of compassion today? Not a trick question. Come on, folks. Who is it? Anyone think it's the Dalai Lama? Is that familiar? That's right, it's the Dalai Lama. So Master Zhi is saying, "Look, this guy is the equivalent of the Dalai Lama."

Now, the Buddha mind seal that is being transmitted—this is a Zen concept that refers to the Buddha's awakening. All of Buddhism begins with the Buddha waking up underneath the Bodhi tree. He had some kind of experience, and this experience is, as it were, the heart of every Buddhist tradition. Every Buddhist tradition believes it's possible for us to go through this same experience. And all Buddhist practice has that as the ultimate aim.

Zen talks about this as the Buddha mind seal. It's about the potentiality for awakening that we all have.

The emperor felt regretful, as you would, so he wanted to send an emissary to invite Bodhidharma to return. Master Chi said, "Your Majesty, don't say that. Even if everyone in the country went after him, he still would not return."

Question: Why would he not return? Especially when an invitation by an emperor is a command that invites death if refused—an invitation in name only. Why would he not return?

It's not that Bodhidharma would not return. It's that he could not return. Can we return to yesterday? Can we replay that moment in the past when we made a wrong choice and our life headed off in a bad direction? Of course we can't. All we've got is now. All we can ever have is now. And no amount of regret or remorse will bring the past back to life. This is why Bodhidharma would not return.

So how can we understand Bodhidharma's "don't know"? We're finally trying to get to what this is about.

This brings us to what the Buddha calls *diṭṭhi*, or view. *Diṭṭhi* is a Pali word—in Sanskrit, *dṛṣṭi*—always translated as "view." For the Buddha, view is very important. In the Eightfold Path, the basic template for the Buddha's teaching, for the training we are meant to undergo, the first factor is right view, *sammā diṭṭhi*. The path begins with right view. If our view is wrong, then the very first step we take is wrong in the sense that it's taking us in the wrong direction—away from awakening, not toward it. Getting our view right is, for the Buddha, very important.

Now, the concept of view is ambiguous. It's ambiguous in English, and we find the same ambiguity in the Buddha's teaching. What is a view? A view is something I see right in front of me. And a view is something I have thought about and reached a conclusion. Both are views.

Consider this situation. I step outside for some fresh air. Looking up, I can see a bright blue sky, but there are dark clouds rolling in from the west. Suddenly there's the sound of thunder and rain is pouring down. I see people scatter for shelter as traffic slows and the streets fill with water. In all of this, what I am describing is a view.

Now, as I see this, the rain reminds me of all the strange things that have been happening to weather patterns in recent years. I've read about growing concerns about climate change and potential catastrophic consequences. I'm thinking about what is the best strategy to limit average global warming. Should we go nuclear or should we focus entirely on renewables? In all of this, what I'm describing is also a view.

But you can see there's a big difference between the two. The first is confined to actual immediate experience. It is direct and experiential. When specifying this, the Buddha calls it *diṭṭha*—what is seen. The second moves away from immediate experience to create a complex narrative based on abstract thinking. This is conceptual in nature, and the Buddha calls this *diṭṭhi-gata*. While both can be called view, they are actually very different.

This is where we get a sense of why Bodhidharma and Wu are talking at cross-purposes, why they're not connecting. Bodhidharma is speaking from direct view. Wu is speaking from conceptual view.

So when Wu asks about the highest meaning of the sacred truths, what he wants is a discussion—a discussion which is learned, mystical, doctrinal. A discussion where he can impress with his knowledge of the texts and convince himself that he's a wonderful ruler who is on the way to awakening.

When Bodhidharma answers "empty, not sacred," he is saying what is immediately clear to him here and now. In a sense, what's right in front of his eyes. Right here, right now, experienced events are coming and going according to conditions. This conversation with the emperor is undulating according to conditions, and there's nothing behind it propping it up—so it's empty.

Now, if we say "sacred," we're suggesting something set apart from the ordinary, something mysterious, something mystical that only the elect can experience, only the few. But there's nothing mysterious about two old men having a chat. Empty, not sacred. Just a warm day in the palace at Yangkan, the capital city, with the breeze shifting the curtains and the coolness of the stone floor.

Do you see the difference between the two views? Is that clear thus far?

If you think about direct view, it is probably the most obvious aspect of our experience. So right now, I'm sitting here on a cushion, feeling the touch of the body against the cushion and the pad on the floor, feeling the contact of the earphones, seeing the screen in front of me and beyond it, sitting in the room, feeling the temperature. It's a bit humid this evening. We just had some rain and it's warm in civilised Brisbane. I'll refrain from disparaging remarks about Victoria.

All of this is clear. It's obvious. And yet, how easily my attention will slip away from this direct view into conceptual view—the world as I think it to be, the world as I perceive it to be—and how easily we are seduced by conceptual view. Of course, all meditators are very familiar with this.

Have you ever had the experience of sitting in meditation, tracking a meditation object which is quite clear, quite obvious—like, just as an example, the movements of your breathing, the sensations of the body—and then suddenly realizing that you've been lost in thought for the past five minutes and didn't even know it? Did you recognise that slide from direct to conceptual view as it was happening? Or did you just figure it out later on? Once you realised you were inside the world of conceptual view, the world of thought and perception and conviction, did you take that world to be real? Did you believe that what is really going on is what you are thinking about? Did you find that world of conceptual view even more emotionally compelling than the world of direct view?

For most of us, the answer to these questions is yes. Overall, we prefer to live in a world of conceptual view rather than the world of direct view. We take the world created by our conceptual views to be real, even more real than the world of direct view. And it's certainly more attractive to us.

So why is that? Well, perhaps the most obvious thing is that the world of conceptual view gives us meaning. It creates stories that explain to us who we are and what our role in the world is. These stories give us order and they give us certainty. In this world, in the conceptual world, we know what is going on.

From the Buddha's perspective, this means that the world of conceptual view gives us much more opportunity for clinging—what he calls *upadana*, appropriation, to take something as one's own. It gives us more opportunity for clinging and it gives us more satisfaction in our clinging. When we cling to the

stories that we tell about ourselves as truly explaining me and my world, at least we know where we stand. Or at least we think we know.

And this is the problem. Because do we really know? Or are we sacrificing the vividness of actual experience for the virtual reality of concept?

As an ordinary, mundane example: direct view is a direct and immediate seeing of something. It might be that I'm doing my meditation practice. Now I'm with my meditation object. And then now I'm swept away by thinking. And then now I realize I'm lost in thought, and I'm faced with the choice of whether or not to come back to the meditation object. Bang, bang, bang, bang. Clear, direct, obvious.

Conceptual view, by contrast, is an abstract view or conviction—like an ideology that explains the world and its workings to me.

"I am the kind of person who is too distracted to meditate successfully. Other people can meditate, but because of my background, my unique personality, I simply cannot."

Have you ever been tempted to believe that? Notice how easily we are seduced by a conceptual view, even when it brings us pain. Perhaps this is because such a view gives us a clear story that stars me as the main character, with my fate as the central concern. This gives us something obvious to cling to, to identify with. It's much harder to cling to the flow of directly experienced phenomena. It's possible, but it's much harder. It's far easier to cling to our imagined world where "I" star in my own perpetual drama. This is what makes conceptual view so seductive.

Conceptual view also offers the bonus of stability. Our beliefs, our convictions—this belief I hold is right today, was right last year, and will be right next year. Have you ever made that move? Even if this belief brings us pain—perhaps a belief in our own inadequacy—at least we have the comfort provided by certainty. "I know this is true." This is why despair, for example, is so seductive: precisely because it gives us certainty. When we are in despair about the future, we are convinced we know what the future will hold. We cling to that certainty, even when it brings us pain. Of course, the obvious fact—proven again and again in our experience—is that we don't actually know what the future will hold. Yet we can create an ideology in which we absolutely know it. That certainty is deeply seductive.

This brings us to not knowing. The world of "don't know" is a world of immediacy and simplicity. The first thing to recognize is that living in this world does not mean we cannot accomplish anything. Look at the two main characters in our story. Bodhidharma did not know—yet he accomplished a tremendous amount. His legacy is Zen Buddhism, and we still study his life and teachings today. Emperor Wu knew, and he worked relentlessly his whole life as a soldier, politician, and student of Buddhism. Yet his entire dynasty collapsed during his own lifetime. Living in the world of "don't know" does not mean we cease to act in the world. In fact, it can make us far more effective.

This world of direct view is immediate and intimate because it is not about anything—it is simply what it

is. The world of conceptual view, by contrast, is always about something else: something separated in time, in space, in identity. We can understand this through the Buddha's teaching on *nimitta*, which can be translated as "sign." A concept is like a sign in that it points toward something else.

Consider a menu. Let's say we're thinking of trying a new restaurant. What do we do? We bring up the website. We study the images, the menu, the reviews. All this information promises a particular kind of experience when we arrive to eat. But the website can never convey the felt experience of actually eating a meal at that place.

When we go there and eat, and afterward we write a review, it would not occur to us to rate the restaurant according to the quality of its website. We rate the felt experience of eating there—the whole package of design, service, food, price. No amount of studying a website can provide that. The restaurant's website may be very useful; it may give us an accurate picture of what the experience will be like. Alternatively, the website may be so wildly inaccurate that when we arrive, we might be tempted to think we've come to the wrong address.

So we could regard the website as useful, as useless, or even irrelevant—we would have checked this place out regardless of what the website said. But no matter how we rate the website, the fact remains that the experience of eating at the restaurant is not the same as the experience of studying the website. It cannot be. The experience of studying a restaurant's website is just an experience of studying the restaurant's website. Simple, direct, obvious.

So, looking at it from Bodhidharma's perspective, which world do we live in? Do we live in a world defined by websites? Or do we live in a world that embraces both the felt experience of studying the website and the felt experience of eating out at the restaurant? The world of don't know is the world where we are clear that what we know from the website is not the feel of eating out—the spiciness of the curry, the hardness of the chair, the sound of conversations around us, the nagging doubt of whether we should have ordered something else. This is the world of don't know. And you notice that it's alive and unfinished. It's moving into something else.

So this brings us to the question of how do we practice don't know? In terms of our meditation practice, for me, our relationship to the body is really important for this. We've pointed out how the world of direct view is not about anything—it's just what it is, here and now. Whereas the world of conceptual view is always about something else, something separated from us in time, in space, in quality. So if we're going to practice don't know, this involves grounding ourselves in something that helps us to be simply present. And probably the best place for that project is what the Buddha calls kāyagatā sati—mindfulness immersed in body.

I think about the activity of sitting and tracking breathing and body sensations. Breathing and body sensations are not about anything at all. First, breathing and body sensations are not telling us a story. They are radically simple—movement and touch. In contrast, the stories that distract us are always about

something removed from this immediate experience. Even if it's simply a commentary on this immediate experience, a comment about this immediate experience has just taken us away.

A very common one would be: I'm sitting, I'm meditating, breathing, body sensation, and the thought pops up, "I think this is going very well." That thought popping up—that's our entry into the world of conceptual view. And you notice how it's about something else, about something that didn't need a story. But we just, boom, put a story on top of it. And then we decide what's most important is the story. Oh, good for me. It's going well. Fantastic.

So breathing and body sensations are not telling us a story. They're just what they are. And of course, secondly, breathing and body sensations are always exactly now. They do not occur in the past. They are not an investment for the future. They're just now. And you notice that the world of conceptual view is a world defined by past and future. Things were like this before. They will be like this again. Or alternatively, they better not be like this again. But in either case, it's defined by time, by past and future.

When we learn to be grounded in the physical world, it's much easier to recognize that our thoughts, our concepts, our perceptions are just that—thoughts, concepts, and perceptions. That's all they are. These thoughts, concepts, and perceptions may well be very useful in some contexts, like the website for the restaurant. And they may be very damaging in other contexts. But whatever they are, they remain just movements in the mind, nothing else.

So when we're grounded in the physical world, we learn to be intimate with the felt flow of experience. And as we get better at this, we also learn to be grounded, to be intimate with the felt flow of mental experience. In other words, the recognition that a thought is just a thought—that's all it is. A feeling is just a feeling. An emotion is just an emotion.

And when we become intimate with the flow of experience, we can start to learn to relax into the uncertainty of not knowing. We discover that, unlike Wu, we do not need the security blanket of having an answer to every question. We find we can trust the universe to show us what needs to be done here and now.

And in this way, we can get a sense of Bodhidharma's "don't know"—and even discover his compassion for a world gone completely mad.

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