

“Vast and Clear, There is no Holiness.”

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The mondo between Bodhidharma and Emperor Wu occupies a central position in the history of Zen, and is known by all practitioners of Zen. Comprised of a few questions and answers, it contains expressions – such as *mukudoku* and *kakunen musho* – which have become part of our heritage. This article presents the entirety of the mondo translated from the original Chinese.

Historically, Emperor Wu of the Liang dynasty reigned from 502 to 550 CE, and was a fervent defender and propagator of Buddhism. Bodhidharma, the 28th Indian patriarch and the first Chinese patriarch, supposedly lived and taught in China around this time. Keeping in mind, however, that Bodhidharma is partially a legendary figure: the first accounts of his existence date back to the year 600. Several stories circulated over the following centuries, but his legend was only firmly established around 1000. With regards to this mondo, it seems that the first mention of it appears around the years 900-950 – that is to say four hundred years after the supposed encounter. I say, “it seems”, because various references are given depending upon the historian consulted (which proves that academic studies on Zen should also be seen from a relative point of view).

In any case, given this time span of four hundred years, the historicity of this mondo has not been firmly established. Furthermore,

the first references to Bodhidharma do not mention it at all, and it is only later that it acquired its status as such a foundational mondo. In the *Hegikan Roku* (*The Blue Cliff Record*), the first great koan collection of the Rinzai school, the first case concerns this mondo. In the *Shōyō Roku* (a koan collection of the Soto school by Master Wanshi, it is the second case. Likewise, it is referred to in the second part of Master Dogen's *Shōbōgenzō Gyōji*. It figures as well in the first Western work on Zen, *Essays on Zen Buddhism* by Daisetsu Suzuki, and in a good number of other introductory books on Zen.

Here is the Chinese version:

1. 「朕自登九五已來。度人造寺。寫經造像。有何功德。」
2. 師曰「無功德。」
3. 帝曰「何以無功德」
4. 師曰「此是人天小果。有漏之因。如影隨形。雖有善因。非是實相。」
5. 武帝問「如何是實功德。」
6. 師曰「淨智妙圓。體自空寂。如是功德。不以世求。」
7. 爾時武帝問「如何是聖諦第一義。」
8. 師曰「廓然無聖。」
9. 帝曰「對朕者誰。」
10. 師曰「不識。」

Let us now examine the translation, phrase by phrase and character by character when necessary. (Complete translation p. 49.)

The first phrase

朕自登九五已來: I, the emperor, I have built/permitted/favored innumerable:

度人: Ordinations of monks (literally: having people cross [the ocean of existence]);

造寺: Constructions of temples;

寫經: Copies of sutras;

造像: Constructions of statues;

有何功德: What merit do I have?

I, the emperor, I have already permitted the ordination of innumerable monks, I have had many temples built, sutras copied, statues erected. What merit have I gained?

The second phrase

The master says (師曰):

無: There is none, not at all; 功德: merit.

– *No merit at all. (Mukudoku)*

Thus the beginning of the mondo revolves around “merit”, as fundamental a notion in ancient Buddhism as in Mahayana. For lay believers, the karmic merits obtained by practices such as alms-giving and the recitation of sutras allow for a better rebirth in a future life. The ideal of ancient Buddhism is the arhat, sometimes translated as “saint”, but also as “the one who merits”, “the worthy one”: the attainment of this state of arhat is the fruit of his practice, of his asceticism. Likewise, the career of a Mahayana bodhisattva is an accumulation of merits, dedicated though to the salvation of all beings. In this way, in this transferral of merits the aspect of compassion is manifested.

The Chinese characters (功德) chosen to translate this notion of merit (*punya* or *guna* in Sanskrit) have special meaning in Chinese thought and give a certain depth to the term: 功: *Ku* in Japanese, read *kung* in Chinese,

means effect, work, merit; and is also found in *kungfu* (skill, ingenious practice).

德: *Doku* in Japanese, read *te* in Chinese, is the essential notion of “virtue”, a term which is also found in the title of the *Tao Te Ching, The Classic of the Way and Virtue*.

Keeping in mind this notion of merit – and the emperor's position – Bodhidharma's response is obviously very strong, and is often cited to demonstrate Zen's radical side. Later in the dialogue, Bodhidharma gives a more detailed explanation which complements this response. In any case, we can already note a certain abusive interpretation, seen in ancient times as well as today. This is the idea that because there is no merit to be found in the construction of pagodas and temples, in the translation or reading of sutras, in erecting statues, that such actions are good for nothing, that there is no need to build temples, translate and so on. However, Dogen in the *Shōbōgenzō Hotsubodaishin* resumes the sermon that he pronounced on the occasion of the completion of the temple of Eihei-ji, a sermon addressed to laypeople and to those who had participated in the construction. Here he explains that – quite to the contrary – building a temple, constructing a pagoda and erecting statues are the very expression of the life of Buddha.

The third phrase

The emperor says (帝曰):

何以: Why; 無功德: no merit.

Why is there no merit?

The fourth phrase

The master says:

此是人天小果: This is a small fruit (果) of human and divine retribution;

有漏之因: It is a cause of illusion (漏: stains, passions, leaks);

如影隨形: Like the shadow (影) follows a shape (形);

雖有善因: Though it is a good cause (善, good, well, virtuous);
(This clause is often omitted from the translations which I consulted. However, it indicates that Bodhidharma does not deny the beneficial aspect of the emperor's meritorious actions.)

非是實相: It is not (非, the *hi* in *hishiryo*: not of the order of, beyond) the real aspect (實相).

– *That [which the emperor has achieved] produces nothing more than a fruit of retribution in the realms of humans and gods, creating illusions like a shadow follows a shape. Though it is a cause of good, it is not of the order of real aspect.*

The fifth phrase

The emperor says:

如何是實功德: *So what is real merit?*

The sixth phrase

The master says:

淨: Pure (like in Pure Land);

智: Wisdom, knowledge (jnana in Sanskrit);

妙: Marvelous, subtle;

圓: Round, perfect, complete (like in the “complete doctrine”).

Pure wisdom is marvelous and perfect.

體: The body; 自: itself; 空: emptiness (ku); 寂: calm, tranquil.

The body itself is without substance and is calm.

如是功德: Thus is merit.

不: it is not; 以: by means of; 世: world; 求: seek.

It is not to be sought in the world.

What is real merit?

– *It is pure, marvelous, perfect wisdom. The body itself is calm and without substance. Merit is like this. It is not to be sought in the world.*

Bodhidharma answers from another level than that of the emperor's intention to seek

worldly merits. The same is valid for us: we too often practice looking for worldly merits. Here it is about the vital matter of passing from a practice of Zen as a practice of acquisition (or of personal development) to a practice which is simply the expression of the life of Buddha, a truly religious practice.

The seventh phrase

The emperor says:

如何是: So / what / is;

聖: Holy, wise, the holy life;

(The Sanskrit word is *arya*, which is used throughout Buddhist terminology as “the fruit of a holy life”);

諦: Truth, the Buddhist term used in the Four Noble Truths;

第一: First;

義: Sense, meaning.

What is the fundamental meaning of the holy truth?

(Or: what is the highest holy truth? What is the meaning of the Noble Truths?)

The question is not about the question of sacredness as it is conceived in Christianity or in the anthropology of religion: it is a question about Buddhist doctrine.

The eighth phrase

(This is Bodhidharma's famous response: *Kakunen musho*)

The master says:

廓 *Kaku*: Vast, great, to extend. There is also here the notion of emptiness, in the way that a desert is empty. It has nothing to do with the idea of emptiness expressed by *ku* (空).

然 *Nen*: Being thus, yes, assuredly, evident.

無 *Mu*: There is not;

聖 *Sho* (The same character as in the question): Holiness, as in the holy truths of Buddhism.

– *Vast and clear, there is no holiness.* (Or: there is no holy truth.)

This *kakunen musho* has come down to us over the centuries and has become a strong expression of the Zen tradition. It has been translated in many ways. One which is often used is, “An unfathomable emptiness and nothing sacred”. Why this translation? It seems that the origin is Daisetsu Suzuki's translation in his *Essays on Zen Buddhism*: “Vast emptiness and nothing holy in it”. Following him, the German historian Heinrich Dumoulin adopted a similar expression, which in the English translation of his work on the history of Zen is, “Vast emptiness, nothing sacred”. Many popularizers – and teachers – have also used this expression, “vast emptiness, no holiness”, which has as a result overtaken all other translations.

However, other translations can be found. For example Frédéric Girard, a respected French Japanologist, translated it as, “en toute clarté, point de sainteté” [“completely clear, no holiness”]. Maryse and Masumi Shibata translate it as, “elle est vaste et sans sainteté” [“it is vast and without holiness”]. Gudo Nishijima, a

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translator of the *Shōbōgenzō*, translates it as, “it is glaringly evident, and without anything sacred”. Taizan Maezumi suggests, “vast and clear, no holiness”. In his commentaries on *Gyoji*, Taizen Deshimaru proposes, “vacant, au-delà de la sainteté” [“empty, beyond holiness”]. All of these latter translations resemble each other rather closely. These are the sorts of translations which I suggest, considering the literal translation of each character.

In the end, the expression, “unfathomable emptiness, nothing sacred”, seems furthest from the original. Beyond the fact that the association of words, “unfathomable emptiness”, does not mean anything at all, why has it been so successful? Undoubtedly because it “has a nice ring” and is easy to remember. Also undoubtedly because it has been the vehicle of an ideology which appealed to the Western intellectuals and artists who were the first to be interested in Zen in the middle of the 20th century. In such avant-garde circles, in their rejection of tradition and advocacy for the deconstruction of established forms (especially artistic, pictorial or literary), the idea of “emptiness” and the “negation of the sacred” suggested an illusion of liberty associated with a quest for the absolute, an idea which was in accord with their aspirations. It is in this way that these revolutionary artists were touched by professor Daisetsu Suzuki's Zen ideology (which was remote from the reality of the Zen tradition, and which would be interesting to examine more closely in order to measure its influence). On the one hand, this permitted an initial introduction of Zen in the West; but on the other hand, this perpetuated errors in interpretation which continue to this day.

The question of the mondo does not revolve around the existence of the sacred, but on the meaning of the holy truths in Buddhism. A “holy truth” is the very definition of dogma. The “no holiness” of Bodhidharma can thus be translated as, “no dogma”. The weak point of spiritual teachings is that they may be understood dogmatically, thus rendering solid and hard what is by nature fluid. In

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his desire to do good, to follow correctly the teachings of the Awakened One, the emperor is imprisoned by his meritorious deeds, and holy truths have become to him a dogma and an obstacle. Through his response, Bodhidharma wants to dissolve these obstacles and show that everything is vast, clear and evident. It seems that for the moment, the emperor has not understood. Let us turn to their last exchange.

The ninth and tenth phrase

The emperor says:

對朕者誰: Who is before me?

Daruma says:

不 *Fu*: Negation;

識 *Shiki*: Which is a translation of the Sanskrit *vinaya* which means "awareness, knowledge, psychic organ, intellect".

Generally this response, *fushiki*, is translated as "I do not know". Master Deshimaru translated it sometimes as "non-conscious-

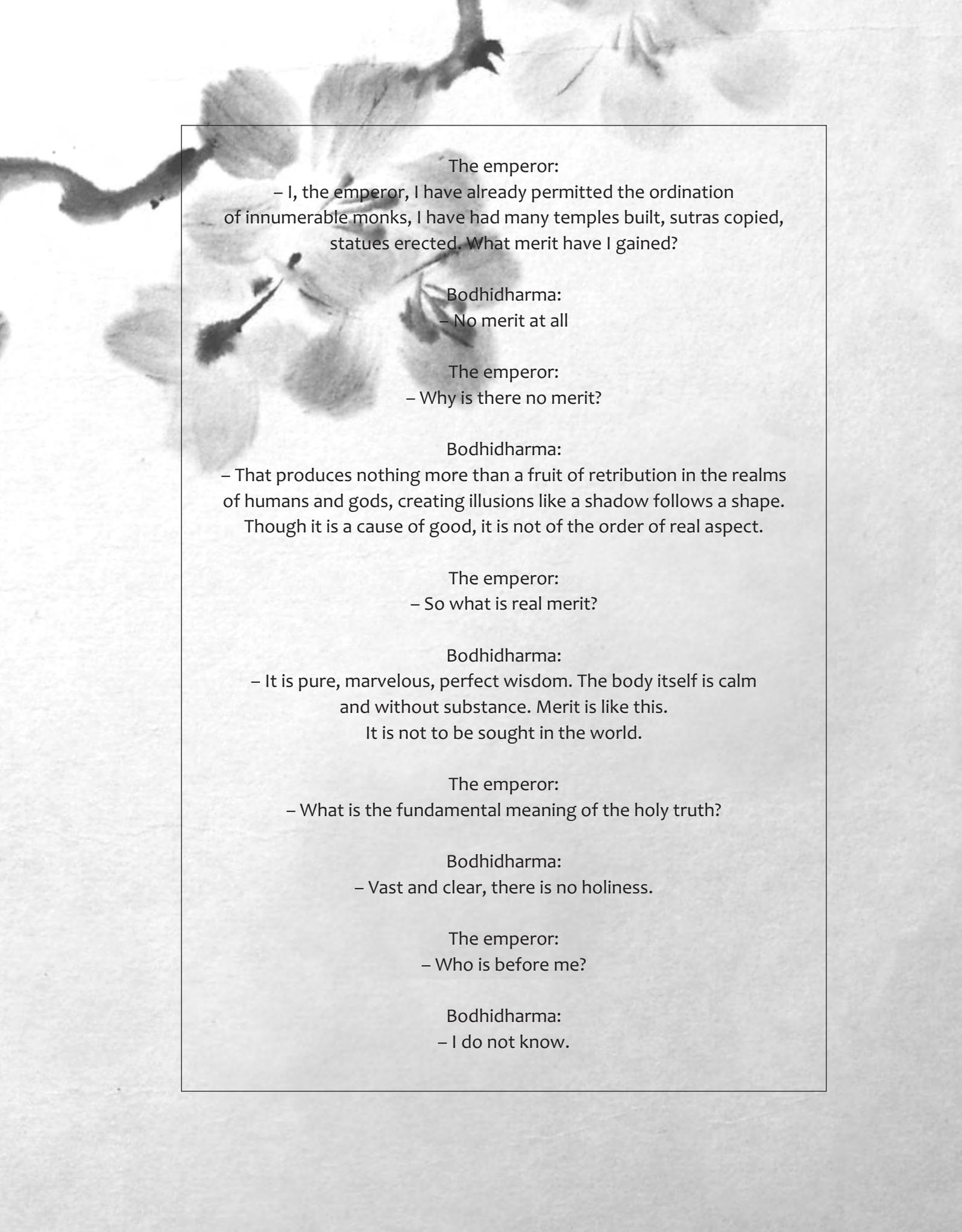
ness", which is closest to the literal meaning of the characters. Let us be satisfied with the classical response, while understanding that it is not a banal "I don't know", that the expression has a Buddhist meaning, that it is an unfathomable, "I do not know."

Who is before me?

– I do not know.

Conclusion

The question of translation posed in this article does is not simply a vain debate among specialists. The meaning changes according to the translation used, and this reflects and induces a certain understanding of Zen. In any case, it seems that we should remain vigilant towards teachings, above all when they are translated. Often in our tradition, teachings (mondo, poems, koans etc.) seem obscure and misleading, simply because the translation is not complete and because we lack the cultural references to grasp their meaning. Dogen, confronted by the same situation, encouraged his disciples to study the practice.



The emperor:

– I, the emperor, I have already permitted the ordination of innumerable monks, I have had many temples built, sutras copied, statues erected. What merit have I gained?

Bodhidharma:

– No merit at all

The emperor:

– Why is there no merit?

Bodhidharma:

– That produces nothing more than a fruit of retribution in the realms of humans and gods, creating illusions like a shadow follows a shape. Though it is a cause of good, it is not of the order of real aspect.

The emperor:

– So what is real merit?

Bodhidharma:

– It is pure, marvelous, perfect wisdom. The body itself is calm and without substance. Merit is like this.
It is not to be sought in the world.

The emperor:

– What is the fundamental meaning of the holy truth?

Bodhidharma:

– Vast and clear, there is no holiness.

The emperor:

– Who is before me?

Bodhidharma:

– I do not know.