

from "Nothing Holy about It: The Zen of Being Just Who You Are" by Tim Burkett (2015)

Mu Ch'i is one of the best-known Chinese Chan (Zen) painters in the world. With nothing more than six persimmons and a great, spacious background, he depicts a path to openness...In Buddhism, emptiness refers to a mind that is open and receptive to whatever is happening. In Mu Ch'i's painting, the two transparent persimmons depict emptiness. They are completely permeable to the surrounding light. According to D. T. Suzuki, "Zen art is meant to train the mind, to bring it into full contact with ultimate reality." By observing our ideas, concepts, and opinions as they arise during meditation, we begin to empty our cup and bring our mind into full contact with ultimate reality. But an empty cup doesn't make us feel very secure.

BEING AT HOME WITH INSECURITY

There is a famous Zen story about Emperor Wu of the Liang Dynasty in China and a legendary, cave-dwelling Indian monk named Bodhidharma, an intimidating figure with red hair, a red beard, and bulging eyes. He is credited with the emergence of Zen in China. Emperor Wu was a devout Buddhist who meditated regularly and devoted a lot of resources to Buddhist temples and monasteries. His reign was a golden age for Chinese Buddhism. The emperor wanted to be recognized for his dedication to Buddhism, so he sent for the great Bodhidharma.

As Bodhidharma stood before him, the emperor asked his burning question, "What is the significance of all I have done?" Bodhidharma growled, "No significance!" The need for recognition stems from deep feelings of unworthiness. Poor Emperor Wu—with all his power, he felt unworthy.

In the previous chapter I talked about the levels of attention that limit our ability to see clearly. The attitude of unworthiness arises from the deepest level, and it afflicts even the most powerful and influential. Bodhidharma saw that Emperor Wu was missing the essence of life, because he was driven by his need for approval.

Emperor Wu was looking to Bodhidharma for endorsement; Bodhidharma was offering him something of far greater value. But the emperor did not understand. He was crushed by Bodhidharma's rejection after all he had done to promote Buddhism. "What is the first principle of your holy teaching?" the emperor implored. He was wondering, If your first principle isn't creating temples and striving for enlightenment, what is it? Bodhidharma said, "A vast emptiness—with nothing holy about it."

This is one of the most repeated stories in Zen. "A vast emptiness with nothing holy about it" is the core of Zen thought. And it paved the way for a radical transformation of "religious" art. In Mu Ch'i's Persimmons, religious life is depicted without any religious symbols at all—no buddhas, bodhisattvas (enlightened beings), or any other celestial beings; no heavens or hells; no paradise scenes; and no mandalas. Just simple, unadorned, everyday objects.

But it was not a mere change in symbols, replacing buddhas with persimmons; this exchange between Emperor Wu and Bodhidharma represents a fundamental shift in Buddhist thought. Early Buddhism had little appreciation for nature. It focused on transcending nature. Bodhidharma's teaching, "A vast emptiness with nothing holy about it" cultivated the ground for a fusion with nature.

"Nothing holy about it" says, don't go searching for buddha nature anywhere else. The truth right before your eyes is all that exists. If your practice is about being holy, you are missing out on life. Don't try to be a good Buddhist. We were all enlightened before we were born. Just be who you already are. Let go of any ideas about lacking something or attaining something. How could we possibly be more than what we are already? There isn't any more. Nada, nada, nada, nada.

By contrast, the concept of holiness is just a convention to help us feel secure in an insecure world. But security is a delusion. Buddha said that one moment of clarity is better than a hundred years of delusion. If we want to experience clarity, we have to accept the truth of insecurity. We live in a world that is ever changing.

Mu Ch'i's six persimmons are surrounded by nothing but open space, yet they are upright and stable. Where does this stability come from? Not knowing where our support comes from creates a sense of vulnerability—but clearly, the persimmons are supported by some unseen something. We don't know what; we will never know; it's unknowable. By letting go of our ideas of being holy, we cultivate a capacity to be at home with insecurity. Without the pretence of holiness, we learn to trust. Suzuki Roshi said, "Enlightenment is an accident. Zen practice makes us accident-prone."

Over the years, I have come to appreciate this saying more and more. It points to an attitude based on trust—not trust in any particular entity or process, but unconditional trust that is not contingent on anything. We can tap in to this trust, but we cannot own it. It is not *my* trust or *your* trust; it is just trust in the basic goodness of the universe, from which we are not separate.

Trust in our basic goodness is foundational in Buddhist thought. It sets Buddhism apart from other major religions. In Buddhism no intermediaries are required to bridge the gap caused by sinfulness, because there is no gap to bridge, and no sin—only suffering and the causes of suffering. Even suffering is a part of our basic goodness. It brings us into direct contact with reality, cultivates compassion, and builds great inner strength when we deal with suffering skillfully.

[Further comment about "basic goodness"]

According to some traditions, we are in exile, alienated from God. From this perspective, we have been ripped out of the fabric of the universe. However, from a Buddhist perspective, our exile is an illusion perpetuated by our conditioning. In Buddhist thought, we can't be ripped out of the fabric of the universe because we are

the fabric of the universe. But the fabric is not solid; at the very ground of our being, we are pure, pristine awareness. This pristine awareness is called our basic goodness, or buddha nature. Trust in our basic goodness is the source of spiritual freedom. Without it, freedom is not possible.