

from "The Hidden Lamp: Stories from Twenty-Five Centuries of Awakened Women" by Zenshin Florence Caplow, Reigetsu Susan Moon

"Zongchi and Bodhidharma's Flesh"
CHINA, FIFTH CENTURY

MASTER BODHIDHARMA had four senior students: three monks and the nun Zongchi. When the time came for him to return to India, he gathered them together. He said to them, "The time has come. Please express your understanding."

Daofu said, "The path transcends language and words and yet is not separated from language and words." Bodhidharma said, "You have attained my skin."

The nun Zongchi said, "It is like the joy of seeing Akshobhya Buddha's paradise just once and not again." "You have attained my flesh," said Bodhidharma.

Daoyu said, "The four elements are originally empty and the five aggregates are nonexistent. I see nothing to be attained." "You have attained my bone," said Bodhidharma.

Finally Huike made a bow to the teacher and stood aside in silence. Bodhidharma said, "You have attained my marrow."

SHOSAN VICTORIA AUSTIN'S REFLECTION

The great Zen teacher Bodhidharma was the founder of Zen in China. Some sources say that he was Persian, and some sources say Indian. In any event, his teaching was simple and direct — direct enough to survive to the present day. In Zen, we usually think of Bodhidharma's disciple Huike as the one who had it right and became Bodhidharma's successor, while the others had a lesser understanding. But actually, Eihei Dogen, the founder of our Zen school in Japan, takes great pains in his commentary on this story to say that all the disciples were right. Any one of them could have been Bodhidharma's successor.

The nun Zongchi's answer is the one that was most maligned by later commentators. They suggested that she was merely repeating something that she had heard. But Bodhidharma said, "You have my flesh." This is acknowledgment of Zongchi's understanding. So what is this paradise that comes just once and not again? Why would Bodhidharma refer to it as flesh? What's important about flesh to Bodhidharma?

At that time, women were thought of as creatures of the flesh, and a woman's flesh was thought of as tainted. Women had to be reborn in the body of a man in order to awaken. This was the common understanding in the culture. But Bodhidharma did not say, "You have a woman's flesh and have to be reborn." He said, "You have my flesh." So what did flesh, or the body, mean to Bodhidharma? Why would he say, "You have my flesh," or my body, to his woman disciple, and not to one of the men?"

Elsewhere Bodhidharma said, “The Buddha is your real body, your original mind. This mind has no form, no characteristics, no cause, no effect, no tendons, and no bones. It’s like space. You can’t hold it. Except for one who’s fully realized, no one — no mortal, no deluded being — can fathom it. So when Bodhidharma says to Zongchi, “You have my flesh,” he means that this thigh, this body — go ahead, slap your thigh! — can’t be fathomed. But nonetheless, when you slap your thigh it feels like there’s something solid there, doesn’t it? How can it not really be there?”

This is what is called the great mystery, or the great matter. And when we sit zazen, we find reality. There is something solid and we can feel that. And, at the same time, we can feel that nothing is ultimately solid. That’s what zazen does. Because we can directly experience this in our meditation practice, we can help people. For instance, a dental hygienist I knew, whose name was Kitty Armel and who died yesterday, was a deeply gentle person. She would bring her dog Shay to the dental office to keep people company when they had their teeth cleaned. Sometimes I would feel her kind hands doing the work through the instruments. The kindness of her hands would transmit something about compassion while cleaning teeth. This is one way to help others.

It’s not that we have something called “buddha nature” or “awakened nature.” The entire body, one hundred percent, is awakened buddha nature. Manifesting our buddha nature is the essence of all the rituals that we do, all the jobs that we do, all the activity in a Zen temple. It is all just for the transmission of awakeness.

I think this is what Bodhidharma was saying. He was saying, “Zongchi, you’re a woman. In our society, women can’t be awakened. But I’m going to acknowledge your very flesh as the same as mine — as one body of awakening that manifests just like mine. It’s a mystery how, as a woman, you have a particular story about yourself in this life. And how, as a man and a monk, I have a different story about myself. And yet, although you manifest in the body of a woman and I manifest in the body of a man, each of us manifests the truth, one hundred percent.” I can hear him saying all that with “You have my flesh.”

Can we ever see paradise for more than a moment?"