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An Interview with Bodhidharma

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Bodhidharma was an Indian Buddhist monk, who moved to China and took up residence at the Shaolin Temple. His dates are uncertain, but his arrival at the Temple was around 500 C.E. According to legend, Bodhidharma was the first patriarch of Zen Buddhism. According to another legend, he was also the founder of Shaolin Kung Fu.



Bodhidharma, woodblock print by Yoshitoshi, 1887, <<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bodhidharma>>.

VOICE: And now, Radio 6UVFM, broadcasting from Xian, China, is proud to bring you a live interview from Shaolin. As you all know, there have been many reports coming from the temple there of strange goings-on. Reputed to be behind these is a new monk from India, Bodhidharma. He seems a rather elusive character, but our reporter has finally managed to catch up with him in a cave near the Temple. We take you there now.

REPORTER: Mr Bodhidharma ...

[Silence]

REPORTER: Mr Bodhidharma ...

[Silence]

BODHIDHARMA: Oh, sorry about that. I was just finishing this morning's meditation session. It's very hard to leave nirvana, you know.

REPORTER: Er ... yes.

[Pause]

REPORTER: Mr. Bodhidharma, a lot of reports of strange events at the Shaolin Temple have been emerging recently. Apparently, groups of monks have been seen going through sequences of violent movements, and even fighting each other. That sort of thing doesn't sound very Buddhist. Some say that you are behind this. I think that our listeners would be interested to know what's going on.

BODHIDHARMA: I don't think that anything very strange is going on, but please feel free to ask.

REPORTER: Is it true that you encourage your monks to fight?

BODHIDHARMA: No ... Yes ... Well, ... Yes and no.

REPORTER: Please stop being evasive. Your monks are seen to be out there fighting. Is this true?

BODHIDHARMA: Not exactly fighting—practicing to fight.

REPORTER: And you encourage this?

BODHIDHARMA: Yes.

REPORTER: Why?

BODHIDHARMA: When I arrived here, they weren't very fit. Sitting in meditation for long periods can be pretty demanding physically, and a lot of the monks really weren't up to it. So I designed a bunch of exercises that they could do to improve their fitness. The monks are now out there every morning doing them, even when it's pissing down with rain. It's hard work, but it toughens them up.

REPORTER: You could at least let them do it indoors!

BODHIDHARMA: Fresh air! Very good for breathing!

REPORTER: Well, you could just as well get the monks to go for a morning run.

BODHIDHARMA: No. It wouldn't be the same. When running, you can turn the mind off. I want the monks to be

focussed on what they are doing—not thinking about what’s for breakfast, or the pretty young news-reader on the TV last night.

REPORTER: Okay, but what about the fighting?

BODHIDHARMA: There’s nothing like a fist hurtling within a centimeter of the nose to focus the mind!

REPORTER: You’re avoiding the point. This is violence. You are teaching people techniques to hurt others.

BODHIDHARMA: Not exactly ... The techniques can hurt others, it’s true. But I’m not teaching them *to* hurt others. I don’t advocate the use of aggression against others. In fact, I find that the monks who work at these techniques actually become more peaceful people. The more they practice the techniques of violence, the less violent they become—the less inclined they are to actually engage in any kind of violence ...

REPORTER: That’s odd. Usually, if you practice doing something, it makes it easier to do ...

BODHIDHARMA: Still, I must confess, the techniques do come in handy sometimes. We live in pretty rough times. As you often report on your station, violence is on the increase. The Temple here is pretty isolated, and from time to time groups of thugs come here trying to steal. They can be pretty violent. We have to defend ourselves.

REPORTER: Is that consistent with the teachings of Buddhism?

BODHIDHARMA: Oh, yes. The Buddha taught compassion for all sentient creatures. But that doesn’t mean that you have to let one of them thump you.

REPORTER: Oh ...

[*Pause*]



Illustration from the Bubishi, <<http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Bubishi.svg>>

REPORTER: Can I change the subject? Is it true that you came from India?

BODHIDHARMA: Yes, I arrived a few years ago.

REPORTER: Why did you come here?

BODHIDHARMA: Well, as you know, I'm sure, Buddhism has been practiced in India for a thousand years. It's starting to catch on in China now, but according to reports coming back to India, the Chinese don't really understand Buddhism. I came here to see if I could help out.

REPORTER: What do you mean?

BODHIDHARMA: When I arrived here I found a lot of devoted monks. They were very conscientiously reading the scriptures, but they didn't really understand them. I was able to develop their understanding.

REPORTER: In what way?

BODHIDHARMA: Well, they took all that stuff so *seriously!* There's a place for that, of course, but in the end, that's not what Buddhism's all about.

REPORTER: Oh?! So what is it about?

BODHIDHARMA: You guys think that you know what reality is. But you don't.

REPORTER: What? The ever-changing world around us? I know it's described like that in the *Book of Changes (I Ching)*.

BODHIDHARMA: The same. When you go to the shop in the morning, and buy a liter of goat's milk, you know that it won't last for ever—like everything else. Even if you don't drink it, it will change into curd.

REPORTER: Yes. So?

BODHIDHARMA: But you still think that when you make the purchase there is something, some objectively existing object, that is transferred from the shop keeper to you.

REPORTER: Isn't there??

BODHIDHARMA: No. You think there is, but that's only the way that you *conceptualize* the situation. You have this label "liter of goat's milk," and you think it applies to an object out there. But in fact it doesn't. What's out there, if I can put it a bit misleadingly, is some stuff—we give it a technical name, "tathata"; some people call it "thusness," but "'stuff'" will do—this stuff does *not* contain a liter of goat's milk, or any of the other things that you think are really out there. It's just that when we apply the name, it makes us think so.

[Pauses]

BODHIDHARMA: (*continues*): And for that matter, exactly the same is true of the shopkeeper and you. What's your name?

REPORTER: "Chan."

BODHIDHARMA: Well, Mr. Chan, you are no more real than the liter of goats milk. You have the illusion that you are objectively real, but you're not. All there really is, is thusness.

REPORTER: (*cockily*): Oh, so *who* is it that has this illusion?

BODHIDHARMA: No one. It's an illusion of an illusion.

REPORTER: (*doubtfully*): Er, ... I see.

[Ponders]

REPORTER: So when you thump one of these marauding thugs, it's really an illusion that you are being violent to someone?

BODHIDHARMA: You could look at it like that.

REPORTER: But then their violence towards you is the same, an illusion?

BODHIDHARMA: Yes, it's the same.

REPORTER: So violence doesn't really matter?

BODHIDHARMA: I didn't say that. A violent attitude is a cause of suffering.

REPORTER: Dead right. Getting thumped isn't a very pleasant experience.

BODHIDHARMA: No. I'm not talking about the person who gets thumped. I'm talking about the person who's doing the thumping.

REPORTER: Let me get this straight. I thump you, and it's me that suffers?

BODHIDHARMA: Almost. If you have the *desire* to thump me ... If you have this desire, it's the result of hatred, greed, or something equally unpleasant. You are suffering.

REPORTER: This *you* that doesn't really exist, right?

BODHIDHARMA: Yes, it's all part of the illusion. The illusion has to go. I said just now that you guys don't understand reality. As long as it appears that there are objects out there worth possessing, and there is a you that can possess them, then there's going to be possessiveness and so on—"attachment", as we say in the trade. This is the cause of suffering.

REPORTER: So once the illusion is stripped away, the desire to be violent also disappears?

BODHIDHARMA: Correct.

REPORTER: And you become at peace with yourself.

BODHIDHARMA: ... and everything else.

REPORTER: Okay, so how do you do it?

BODHIDHARMA: Well, there's not much point in my telling you. Even if you believed me—which you probably don't—it wouldn't mean much to you. You must experience the illusory nature of things for yourself.

REPORTER: Myself ... who is part of the illusion?

BODHIDHARMA: Yes, we've been through all that. Don't keep bringing it up. You have to experience thusness for yourself. Only then will you truly understand the illusory nature of this conceptual construction, which the unenlightened take for reality.

REPORTER: Ah ... That's the point of meditation, right?

BODHIDHARMA: Right.

REPORTER: Can you tell me a bit about what meditation involves? What do you actually have to do?

BODHIDHARMA: As I said, there's no point in telling you about this. You have to do it. Why don't you come along and join us at the Temple? I think we may have a special offer on for journalists at this week.

REPORTER: Do I have to do the fighting exercises?

BODHIDHARMA: Yes.

REPORTER: In the rain?

BODHIDHARMA: Yes.

REPORTER: I'll think about it.

BODHIDHARMA: Very well.

[He turns to go ...]

REPORTER: Wait. Can't you just say a *little* about what is involved in meditation? I'm sure that our listeners would be fascinated.

BODHIDHARMA: Ah ... Fascination. Another attachment to an illusory world.

[He hesitates, seeming to weigh up various considerations.]

BODHIDHARMA: Very well then ... What you have to learn to do is to see reality, thusness, without the overlying conceptual frame. You have to, as it were, learn to see through it. This isn't easy: we're so used to seeing no further than the frame. It can be done only by a process of intense mental concentration and focus.

REPORTER: So how do you do that?

BODHIDHARMA: One technique we teach beginners involves breathing. Breathing is not just getting air in and out. It is deeply connected with thusness. By focussing on it, it can act as a gateway.

REPORTER: I see.

BODHIDHARMA: No, you don't really. The understanding comes only with the practice. This is demanding work. You must work very hard, and do so again and again, till everything becomes natural. The result, when it comes, may

be very sudden. But to get to this point normally takes years of practice.

REPORTER: Okay. But there's not much point in getting rid of attachments only when you are sitting meditating. You can't spend your whole life meditating. You have to get on with the necessities of life—sex, drugs, and rock'n'roll, as we say in the trade—and this is when attachment is going to be at its strongest.

BODHIDHARMA: Sitting? Who said anything about sitting? You *can* do these things sitting. That's a particularly good way for beginners. But you can do it when you are moving around too. You can meditate while you walk, for example. And, well, some physical activities which require intense mental focus and breath control are particularly conducive to this sort of mental state.

REPORTER: Huh. So you can do it while you are doing other things as well?

BODHIDHARMA: Yes, the aim in the end—though only advanced practitioners can do this—is to be able to see the world in this way *whatever* you are doing.

[A long pause]

REPORTER: Mr Bodidharma—



Enlightenment, <<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ens%C5%8D>>.

BODHIDHARMA: Yes?

REPORTER: These martial art exercises of yours—

BODHIDHARMA: Yes?

REPORTER: They're not really about fighting, are they?

[Silence]

VOICE: I'm sorry. We seem to have lost the line to our reporter. We will get back to Shaolin as soon as we can. In the meantime, here is some popular Chinese music.