



## **"...and to the Source Kept True," Part I: The Immaculacy of Emptiness.**

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Some years ago I changed the translation of the word "mu" in the *Hannyashingyo*, or *Scripture of Great Wisdom*, from "voidness" or "emptiness" to "purity." This was not an idle change or a personal opinion since it was based on my master's and my own understanding of the teachings of Bodhidharma of whom we are both direct descendants. Many translators of *The Scripture of Great Wisdom*, being Christian missionaries and therefore frequently more interested in converting Buddhists to Christianity than having an accurate, in-depth understanding of what the Buddhist Scriptures teach, were not as careful as I believe they could have been in their translations: had they been so, they would have discovered that "voidness" and "emptiness" are words that only peripherally touch the implications of "mu." Anyone who meditates deeply and has any real spiritual realisation knows that this voidness and emptiness are the fullest voidnesses and emptinesses possible. I used the phrase "the immaculacy of emptiness" to try and push people on beyond emptiness and voidness for many years: in the end, however, I decided that the teachings of Bodhidharma, whose authority on the subject is absolutely unimpeachable, made it extraordinarily clear that the word "mu" should be translated as "pure" and that western Buddhists should not be intimidated by the trick sophistry of those who only peripherally understand Zen. The following is a quote from sermons attributed to Bodhidharma, translated by Red Pine, on immaculacy and emptiness:-

Fourth, practicing the Dharma. The Dharma is the truth that all natures are pure. By this truth, all appearances are empty. [Emphasis added. J.K.] The sutras say, "The Dharma includes no being because it's free from the impurity of being. And the Dharma includes no self because it's free from the impurity of self." Those wise enough to believe and understand this truth are bound to practice according to the Dharma. Since the embodiment of the Dharma contains nothing worth begrudging, they give their body, life and property in charity, without regret, without the vanity of giver, gift or recipient, and without bias or attachment. And they take up transforming others to eliminate impurity but without becoming attached to form. Thus, through their own practice, they're able to help others and glorify the Way of Enlightenment. And as with charity, they also practice the other virtues. But while practicing the six virtues to eliminate delusion, they practice nothing at all. This is what's meant by practicing the Dharma.<sup>1</sup>

The use of the words "void" and "empty" have led many, many, good, prospective, western Buddhists to despair since what they found was an empty emptiness, but what Bodhidharma speaks of here is an emptiness, or a voidness, full of immaculacy. An immaculate thing is clean and pure. Here the word "pure" contains both the peripheral meaning of "empty of filth, dirt and defilement" and the pictorial representation of fire burning up uncleanness as seen in the Chinese character "mu." It implies purity by its very shape and bears out Bodhidharma's, my master's and my own understanding of the use of the word "pure" in *The Scripture of Great Wisdom*.

# Mu: 無

I again quote Bodhidharma:-

*That which follows is witnessed on the Way. It's beyond the ken of arhats and mortals. When the mind reaches nirvana, you don't see nirvana. Because the mind [itself] is nirvana. If you see nirvana somewhere outside the mind, you're deluding yourself.*<sup>2</sup>

This paragraph is the authority, backed by discussions with my master, for my translation of the words "And, going on beyond this human mind, he is Nirvana" in *The Scripture of Great Wisdom*. I again quote Bodhidharma:-

Every suffering is a buddha-seed. Because suffering impels mortals to seek wisdom. But you can only say that suffering gives rise to buddhahood. You can't say that suffering is buddhahood. Your body and mind are the field. Suffering is the seed, wisdom the sprout and buddhahood the grain.<sup>3</sup> [Emphasis added. J.K.]

Thus Bodhidharma describes the Four Noble Truths: suffering exists, when we find the cause of suffering we find wisdom, the end of suffering is the sprout of the Buddha-seed and Buddhahood is the result of the Eightfold Path, the grain. I again quote Bodhidharma:-

When the three poisons [greed, hate and delusion] are present in your mind, you live in a land of filth. When the three poisons are absent from your mind, you live in a land of purity. [Emphasis added. J.K.] The sutras say, "If you fill a land with impurity and filth, no buddha will ever appear." Impurity and filth refer to delusion and the other poisons. A buddha refers to a pure and awakened mind.<sup>4</sup>

Here the characters for "mind" are "heart" and "centre;"

心

Shin: heart

中

Chū: center

they are frequently also translated as "Buddha Nature" or "That Which Is the essence of a human being;" "mind" should not be thought of as the intellectual mind. Again Bodhidharma says, "According to the world, there's male and female, rich and poor. According to the Way, there's no male or female, rich or poor."<sup>5</sup> It is upon this that Dogen Zenji, having proved it true for himself, based his teaching of the equality of the sexes in Buddhism. Says Bodhidharma, "When the goddess realized the Way, she didn't change her sex. When the stable boy awakened to the Truth, he didn't change his status. Free of sex and status, they shared the same basic appearance" [Nature].<sup>6</sup> To think thus is to understand the Path. As Bodhidharma says, "To seek nothing is bliss. When you seek nothing, you're on the Path."<sup>7</sup> To be contented with yourself as you are is to be on the Path. This is because a person has understood the true meaning of purity and is neither empty, and therefore in need of something, nor full, and therefore complacent.

I would not have gone into this matter at all had I not heard recently that someone had changed the word "pure" back to "void" or "empty" when using *The Scripture of Great Wisdom*. Of course anyone can use any translation they wish. The translations that I have made, as I have said, were not made upon my single authority, and I was interested to see that the translation of the *Sandokai* and *The Most Excellent Mirror—Samadhi*, used here in Shasta Abbey, are now the official English

translations of the Soto Church in Japan. This article should not be understood as a defence of the use of the word "pure" in *The Scripture of Great Wisdom* but simply as an attempt to explain why the word "pure" and the phrase "He is Nirvana" are much more in-depth translations than the old Christian "empty" and "void" were.

Whilst on this subject I would like to bring up one other matter, which is the constant complaint of some Christians that Buddhism is atheistic. The following is a quote from the *Udana Scripture*, found in *The Minor Anthologies of the Pali Canon*, part II, "Verses of Uplift," Chapter VIII, section iii:-

Monks, there is a not-born, a not-become, a not-made, a not-compounded. Monks, if that unborn, not-become, not-made, not-compounded were not, there would be apparent no escape from this here that is born, become, made, compounded. But since, monks, there is an unborn, a not-become, a not-made, a not-compounded, therefore the escape from this here [that] is born, become, made, compounded is apparent.<sup>8</sup>

I have used various terms for the implication of the Unborn, Undying, Unchanging, Uncreated. It was my master who called it "That Which Is." When I suggested "the Eternal," he thought it a good explanation. To explain something by what it is not is just as good an explanation as to explain it by what it is. The apophatic and cataphatic ways of expressing the inexpressible are equally good, and explaining the inexpressible by what you know for certain it is not prevents over-statements and serious mistakes. Anyone who believes that Buddhism is atheistic should study the *Udana Scripture* with great care; the Christian missionaries had a lot of difficulty with it and, in the end, decided, in many cases, to be rude about it or to just pooh-pooh it. That which is True does not have to insist upon Truth: those who are real Buddhists understand this clearly. To quote from *The Song of Bernadette*:- "To those who believe no explanation is necessary and to those who don't no explanation will ever suffice." I do not expect what I have written here to convert the unbelievers, only to let them know that I hope they eventually come to realise the Truth.

### Notes.

1. Great Master Bodhidharma, *The Zen Teaching of Bodhidharma*, trans. Red Pine (Port Townsend, Washington: Empty Bowl, 1987), p. 3.
2. Ibid., p. 31.
3. Ibid.
4. Ibid.
5. Ibid., p. 32.
6. Ibid. [The goddess is spoken of in Chapter Seven of *The Vimalakirti Nirdeśa Sutra*, trans. Charles Luk (Berkeley, California: Shambhala Publications, 1972), pp. 70-80.]
7. Ibid., p. 3.
8. Trans. by F. L. Woodward, M.A. (London: Oxford University Press, 1948), p. 98.

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