

Bodhidharma: The 28th Patriarch of Mahayana Buddhism in India

Palash Chandra Modak
SACT, Department of History, Siliguri College

Abstract: *Bodhidharma, the 28th Patriarch of Mahanaya Buddhism in India and also the First Patriarch in China went to China to proclaim the Dharma (Buddhist Teaching or Law). He is an icon in the Mahayana tradition. The historical Bodhidharma (known as Daruma in Japan) was an Indian sage who lived sometime in the fifth or sixth century AD. He is the undisputed founder of Zen Buddhism and credited with Zen's introduction to China during his travels to the Middle Kingdom. History books give details of the Gautama Buddha and Buddhism, but they hardly mention the Bodhidharma and his greatest contribution as an Indian Buddhist monk. That's why an attempt has been made in this paper to introduce the glorious history of this Buddhist monk. Currently, a project has been planned by those who intend to build a memorial structure at the land (in Kanchipuram) owned by the Institute of Asian Studies (Chennai, India). This paper is written with the hope and confidence in worldwide spiritual support for this endeavour.*

Keywords: Bodhidharma, Mahayana Buddhism, Zen Buddhism, Martial Arts

Bodhidharma, the 28th Patriarch of Mahanaya Buddhism in India and also the First Patriarch in China went to China to proclaim the Dharma (Buddhist Teaching or Law). He is an icon in the Mahayana tradition. This is the study of Bodhidharma's life and his unique role in providing the building blocks for many martial arts including Karate and the spreading of Zen Buddhism in Asian countries. Bodhidharma was an Indian monk and also was a medicine. I chose Bodhidharma because he was that Indian Buddhist monk whose contribution has fertile several cultures of different Asian countries but in his motherland, he is neglected for a long time. Even it is very unfortunate that till now few Indian people know about this Indian Sage though he is one of the most important parts in Indian history.

The Early Life of Bodhidharma:

There are many versions of the early of Bodhidharma and even his birthplace. According to Tsutomu Kambe, a professor of Tokyo University, in his book "Stories from Chinese Literature", he discussed Bodhidharma and states: "*Bodhidharma was born as the third son of a South Indian King according to Chinese historical documents. It is speculated that the kingdom was Pallava, it's a capital city being Kanchipuram (pronounced as Kan-Zhi) near Chennai. This is close to Kanchi (-puram), an old capital town in the state Tamil-Nadu of south India (the part 'Puram' means a town or a state in the sense of earlier times). It was the capital of the Pallava Dynasty at the time when Bodhi-Dharma was living. The Pallava Dynasty is recorded as an oceanic state, trading with Mediterranean countries to the west and with China, Siam, Fiji and others to the east. It is conjectured that Bodhi-Dharma departed from Kanchipuram to the nearest port Mamallapuram and embarked from there. He was named Bodhitara and his surname was Shatriya (the class of kings and warriors).*"¹Most of our knowledge about Bodhidharma comes from a 1053 AD Chinese document named Chuanfa Zhengzongji. This is translated into English as "Record of the Transmission of the Law and Correct Teaching." In many accounts, Bodhidharma was said to be the son of a Brahmin king in southern India. After achieving enlightenment, he became the 28th successor to Shaka Nyorai(the Historical Buddha).

Bodhidharma was born around the year 440 AD in Kanchipuram, near Madras, the capital of the Southern Indian kingdom of Pallava. He was a Brahman by birth and the third son of King Simhavarman. At the age of seven, he purportedly began making observations of precocious wisdom (e.g. "The mind is a jewel"). When he was young, he was converted to Buddhism, and later he received instruction in the Dharma from Prajnatarā, whom his father



Bodhidharma (Daruma)
15th-century painting by Shōkei,
Treasure of Nanzenji Temple, Kyoto, Japan.
Photo courtesy Kyoto National Museum

had invited from the ancient Buddhist heartland of Magadha. Prajnatarā, Bodhidharma's master, told him to go to China because the people who had reached there before him had made a great impact. They were great scholars, many disciplined people, very loving and peaceful and compassionate, but none of them were enlightened. And now China needed another Gautama Buddha. The ground was ready. Bodhidharma was the first enlightened man to reach China. The point I want to make clear is that while Gautama Buddha was afraid to initiate women into his commune, Bodhidharma was courageous enough to be initiated by a woman on the path of Gautama Buddha. There were other enlightened people, but he chose a woman for a certain purpose. And the purpose was to show that a woman can be enlightened. Since the traditional overland route was blocked by the Huns, and since Pallava had commercial ties throughout Southeast Asia, Bodhidharma left by ship from the nearby port of Mahaballipuram.² After skirting the Indian coast and the Malay Peninsula for three years, he finally arrived in Southern China around 475AD. Bodhidharma who propagated his version of Mahayana Buddhism was the last Patriarch in India, and the first Patriarch of Mahayana Buddhism in China.³ I would like to say that although he was a follower of Gautama Buddha; in some instances, he shows higher flights than Gautama Buddha himself. Buddhism had reached China six hundred years before Bodhidharma. It was something magical; it had never happened anywhere, at any time -- Buddha's message immediately caught hold of the whole Chinese people.⁴

His teacher, Prajnatarā, changed the boy's name from Bodhitara to Bodhidharma. Following his father's death, Bodhidharma served Prajnatarā for many years spreading Buddhism. Upon Prajnatarā's death, Bodhidharma left his monastery in India to follow his master's last wish that he go to China and spread the teaching.⁵ This Dharma Master was a South Indian of the Western Region. His divine insight was clear; whatever he heard, he understood. His ambition lay in the Mahayana path and so he put aside his white layman's robe for the black robe of a monk. He merged with the sage lineage and made it flourish. His dark mind was empty and quiescent. He comprehended the events of the world. He understood both Buddhist and non-Buddhist teachings. His virtue surpassed that of the leaders of the

age. According to old records, his final place of rest was at the Bear-Ear Mountain of He-Nan Province of China, where there is a temple Kong-Xing Si to commemorate Bodhi-Dharma.⁶ However, in the ancient town Kanchipuram where Bodhi-Dharma is supposed to have grown up, there is nothing to remind us of him. It is considered that there were many Buddhist structures in Kanchipuram, but most of them were destroyed by the ravages of time and by the opponents of Buddhism. At present, it is a sacred town of Hinduism. Historical remains related to Buddhism found in that region are very limited in number, although one can come across a large number of Buddhist remains in the Hindu temples of this antique city. Devotees and interested individuals from different countries may wish to be informed and experience some sense of this great person Bodhi-Dharma in Kanchipuram. Currently, a project is being planned by those who intend to build a memorial structure at the land (in Kanchipuram) owned by the Institute of Asian Studies (Chennai, India).⁷ This article is written with the hope and confidence in worldwide spiritual support for this endeavour. He is presently known as Da 'mo in China and where Mahayana Buddhism became Chan Buddhism.⁸ No one is sure of how Bodhidharma passed away. Bodhidharma was buried at Bear Ears Mountain (Shon Er Shan) in Henan Province in China. But in his burial tomb, there is only one of his sandals.⁹ Some people believe that he came back to life and is living in the Himalayas as a spirit carrying one of his sandals. Credit must be given to those authors of various records of the 5th century and later years who recorded his activities and teachings there. Credit also must go to Japanese researchers who have done intensive research about his background right from the inception of Mahayana Buddhism.¹⁰

The journey of Bodhidharma:

Which sea-route did Bodhi Dharma (the First Patriarch of Zen-Buddhism) take to get to China from India? Its details are not known. It is said that a possible route he took was an Oceanic Silk Road.¹¹ Before the Christian era already, there were active trade routes across the Indian Ocean between India and China. Bodhi Dharma likely chose this course. Bodhi Dharma's ship departed Mamallapuram, a main port closest to Kanchipuram, and headed for Sri-Lanka. This is just a conjecture. Likely, they stayed there a couple of months waiting for favourable monsoon wind, preparing for the great journey crossing the Indian Ocean. It might take another couple of months to get to a port in Sumatra or Java Island.¹² It may have taken a half or more of a year (depending on circumstances) since he departed his home country Kanchipuram. It is likely that he may have been invited by a royal family at the place he was staying, or that he stayed at a temple for rain retreat in summertime according to the Buddhist custom, or that he spent half a year by preparing his next journey, waiting for a favourable wind, or trading. Once everything was ready, they finally embarked for Guangzhou, China.¹³ It may have taken two months or so to get to their destination. Two years should have been sufficient time for the whole journey. The "three years" written in the record may imply that it was the third year since he departed his home country, rather than that it took full three years. Mainstream Buddhist tradition holds that Bodhidharma arrived in China in 520 AD, although there are historical indications that he may have arrived in 470 AD, or even as early as 420 AD.¹⁴ There is no agreement as to the route he traveled or where he arrived first. Some say he traveled by sea, risking his life over the towering waves, from Madras in southern India to Guangzhou and then by land to Nanjing. Other scholars believe that he walked a well-beaten trail over the Pamir Plateau, across the desert and along the Yellow River to Luoyang, the provincial capital and center of Chinese Buddhist culture.¹⁵ In any case, the journey from India is agreed to have been long and dangerous. Since it is said that he was from Kanchipuram, he would have started his long journey from the port of Mahabalipuram. It is said that he disembarked at many places en route to China - some of those places being Palembang, which was the capital city of the ancient kingdom of Srivijaya and the present capital of the South Sumatra province in Indonesia. It is also said that he disembarked in Malaysia, Cambodia, Thailand, and Vietnam.

The Zen Teaching of Bodhidharma:

The word *Zen* is the Sinico-Japanese abbreviation of the Sanskrit Dhyana or Meditation.¹⁶ It implies the whole body of teachings and disciplines peculiar to a Buddhist sect now popularly known as the Zen sect. Buddhist denominations, like non-Buddhist religions, lay stress on scriptural authority; but Zen denounces it on the ground that words or characters can never adequately express religious truth, which can only be realized by the mind; consequently, it claims that the religious truth attained by Shakya Muni in his Enlightenment has been handed down neither by word of mouth nor by the letters of scriptures, but from teacher's mind to the disciple's through the line of transmission until the present day. Buddhists, as well as non-Buddhist religions, regard, without exception, their founders as superhuman beings, but the practisers of Zen hold the Buddha as their predecessor, whose spiritual level they confidently aim to attain. An epoch-making event took place in the Buddhist history of China by Bodhidharma's coming over from Southern India to that country in about A.D. 520.¹⁷ It was the introduction, not of the dead scriptures, as was repeatedly done before him, but of living faith, not of any theoretical doctrine, but practical Enlightenment, not of reliance on Buddha, but of the Spirit of Shakya Muni; so that Bodhidharma's position as a representative of Zen was unique. Zen began to emerge as a distinctive school of Mahayana Buddhism when the Indian sage Bodhidharma (ca. 470-543) taught at the Shaolin Monastery of China. To this day Bodhidharma is called the First Patriarch of Zen.¹⁸

A more important personage in the history of Zen previous to the Blue-eyed Brahmin is Buddhahadra, a well-known Zen master, who came over to China A.D. 406. His translation of Dharmatara-dhyana-sutra (which is said to have been preached by Bodhidharma himself when he was in India) and that of Avatamsaka-sutra may be said without exaggeration to have laid the corner-stone for Zen. He gave a course of lectures on the Zen sutra for the first time in China in A.D. 413, and it was through his instruction that many native practisers of Zen were produced, of whom Chi Yen (Chigon) and Huen Kao (Gen-ko) are well known.¹⁹ In these days Zen should have been in the ascendant in India because almost all Indian scholars—at least those known to us—were called Zen teachers—for instance, Buddhahadra, Buddhasena, Dharmadhi, and some others were all Zen scholars. Chinese Buddhist scholars did no less than Indian teachers toward the uprising of Zen. The foremost among them is Hwui Yuen (E-on, died A.D. 414), who practiced Zen by the instruction of Buddhahadra.²⁰

When he was reincarnated in Japan, he came to be fondly known as Daruma San and the original Mahayana Buddhism came to be known, again, as a branch of Zen Buddhism. It traveled from China to Japan through Korea. In Korea, it is known as Seon. Bodhidharma (also known as *Taishi Daruma* in Japan) eventually became revered as the founder of Zen Buddhism. He is the most famous of all the millions of monks who have studied and taught the Dharma in China. The reason is that he alone is credited with bringing Zen to China. Of course, Zen, as meditation, had been taught and practiced for several hundred years before Bodhidharma arrived. And much of what he had to say concerning doctrine had been saying before by Tao-sheng, for example, a hundred years earlier. But Bodhidharma's approach to Zen was unique. As he says in these sermons, "Seeing your nature is Zen Not thinking about anything is Zen Everything you do is zen."²¹ While others viewed Zen as purification of the mind or as a stage on the way to Buddhahood, Bodhidharma equated Zen with Buddhahood—and Buddhahood with the mind, the everyday mind. Instead of telling his disciples to purify their minds, he pointed them to rock walls, to the movements of tigers and cranes, to a hollow reed floating across the Yangtze, to a single sandal. Bodhidharma's Zen was Mahayana Zen, not Hinayana Zen—the sword of wisdom, not the meditation cushion. As did other masters, he undoubtedly instructed his disciples in Buddhist discipline, meditation, and doctrine, but he used the sword that Prajnatara had given him to

cut their minds free from rules, trances, and scriptures. Such a sword, though, is hard to grasp and hard to use.

Bodhidharma: The Father of Martial Arts:

Bodhidharma (Jp. = Daruma) is often referred to as the founder of martial arts in both China and Japan.²² At the fabled Shaolin Temple in China, where Daruma is said to have achieved enlightenment, the temple even today maintains a large rock on which one can see Daruma's shadow -- burned into the rock during Daruma's long years of meditation in front of it. Doshin, who founded Japan's Shorinji Kempo School in 1947, says Daruma appeared to him in a dream, and this inspired Doshin to establish his school. Legends like this have developed largely outside Buddhism, with a stronger connection to Daoist (Taoist) traditions. Nonetheless, Bodhidharma's title as the founder of martial arts is still contested among scholars and historians. According to Gordon Watson, though many doubt the authenticity and accuracy of the Bodhidharma legend, there is some evidence to support many aspects of the story. For example, wall paintings that can still be seen at the Shaolin Temple portray dark-colored, perhaps Indian monks among the lighter-skinned Chinese monks practicing or teaching Kempo. This seems to substantiate the belief that Kempo was originally Indian.²³ Also, the fact that no other temple in China has a history and tradition of Kempo indicates a possible connection with Bodhidharma. Most Western students of Asian martial arts, if they have done any research on the subject at all, will surely have come across references to Bodhidharma. He is known as "*Daruma*" in Japan and this Indian Buddhist monk is cited as the prime source for all martial arts styles.

Bodhidharma left and made his way to the Shaolin temple. Some believe that the master inspired him to go to the Shaolin temple. Once he reached the temple he immediately found a cave and meditated facing a wall for nine years. When his meditation time was over he was invited into the temple. Bodhidharma tried to teach them meditation but he soon realized that they lacked the focus and the stamina. The monks were very weak and tend to fall asleep during meditation. So Bodhidharma taught the monks an Indian exercise that he learned when he was the prince in India that taught them self-discipline, toughness and focus. It was called the "*Eighteen Lohan Hands*".²⁴ The "*Eighteen Lohan Hands*" was one of the influences that started Kung Fu. The "*eighteen Hands*" was named after the Lohans. Lohans are the people who learned directly from Buddha. The "*Eighteen Hands*" is a fundamental Chi Kung Fu exercise, which can bring amazing benefits. Bodhidharma spent a lot of time observing Bharatanatyam in his time as a prince and brought it over to China. Bharatanatyam is one of the classical dances in India. Kalaripayattu is an ancient martial art that was practiced in India.²⁵ It includes weapons, sticks and kicks. Kalaripayattu requires great flexibility and utilizes several animal stances. It is speculated that Bodhidharma might have brought over a little bit of Bharatanatyam and Kalaripayattu which influenced the beginnings of Chinese Kung Fu.

Mahayana or Zen Buddhism has given birth to a vast literary corpus. If Gautama Buddha was the Light of Asia, Bodhi-Dharma is a great Asian beacon of philosophy. It is a matter of great pride for us that this great Buddhist teacher hailed from India (Kanchipuram). Pranab Mukherjee, the previous Indian Foreign Minister, also referred to Bodhidharma in his speech when he inaugurated the Indian Consulate in Guangzhou a few years ago, mentioning that the connection between India and China goes back centuries. To help the advance study of Indian philosophy and Mahayana Buddhism, the Institute of Asian Studies planned to establish a Buddhist Study Centre named after Bodhi-dharma in Kanchipuram, the birthplace. Bodhidharma remains today a prime symbol of the will power, determination and self-discipline that are essential to succeed in the martial arts. Following his example, the modern martial arts try to endure what is most difficult to do and practice what is most difficult to practice (like hours of kata). Bodhidharma's example of the Master-student relationship for teaching the way to enlightenment still lives throughout the martial arts. His teaching in Shaolin Kung Fu was passed on to Japan and many other countries. Cultural influence and adaptations one branch leads to

modern-day karate. That's why Bodhidharma is known and accepted as the father of karate and most Asian Martial Arts.

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