

Bodhidharma's Vast Emptiness

The Emperor, like many of us and countless Zen monks in other koans, seems to be grappling with the question of the nature of ultimate reality. He is looking for some substantive answer, somewhere to stand amid life's tribulations and expects to hear it from this reputedly great sage from India. Instead, Bodhidharma offers only groundlessness, emptiness. Everything empty of any enduring quality, everything impermanent, nothing with any essence that doesn't change, including humans, who are empty of self.

Puzzled, the Emperor questions the credentials of Bodhidharma. But with his simple 'don't know' Bodhidharma removes any further attempt to establish some basis in knowledge.

But, as it says in another koan, this 'not-knowing is most intimate.' But it is not a way of ignorance, rather, a way of being open to everything. When we know something it kind of freezes and solidifies that area for us and closes us off from new possibilities.

Thinking about Pema's last chapter, perhaps we can notice the way we freeze reality a little bit as we adopt roles. Isn't role-playing a way of providing a nice safe character to be that narrows down the range of responses we have to choose from and allows us to pre-plan how we can react according to how this character should react? Last weekend I met a couple of guys I hadn't seen for 47 years and that showed me my own searching for a role to play before I met them this time. When I noticed this, I tried to relax into just whatever, whoever, I am now, and that was far easier really.