

The body is the bodhi tree  
The mind is like a bright mirror's stand.  
At all times we must strive to polish it  
And must not let dust collect.  
- Hongren

Bodhi originally has no tree  
The bright mirror also has no stand  
Fundamentally there is not a single thing  
Where could dust arise?  
- Shenxiu

From what I remember this poem is actually two poems which were written when a new abbot was required for a monastery and the monks were required to write a verse to prove themselves worthy of the post. The first one was written by the man who would be deemed the natural successor, the head monk. It stresses the need for practice and the discipline and effort needed to maintain mind clarity. It talks about polishing the stand, not the mirror itself - in other words being careful and meticulous in practicing in the framework of support provided by the Zen forms. The mirror metaphor is often used in Zen to signify that a mind should be able to merely reflect what passes in front of it, not hook on to it.

Shenxiu (or Hui Neng using the Japanese form) was an illiterate peasant who was reputed to have become enlightened when he heard the following line from the Diamond Sutra - "Depending upon no-thing, you must find your own mind."

He saw that, though useful for pointing the way, we must abandon all of our props and forms and see the groundless nature of reality.

"Where could dust arise" struck me. It reminds me of last week's discussion on anger. We work so much to find ways to deal with these mental states when, really, all we have to do is realize they don't exist, but are mind created phantasms. We have to let go of the stickiness that wants to cling to thoughts that churn away repetitively at our experiences. How soon after an upsetting experience do the thoughts persist? They should have nowhere to alight.