

Tenborin Zoom - 23 May 2026

In China, continues Master Koun Ejo, when the emperor asked him about the ultimate truth, the great master Bodhidharma replied: *'All is empty and nothing is sacred.'*

It is worth revisiting this famous mondo between Bodhidharma and Emperor Wu of Liang. Bodhidharma hits the mark with every answer. This mondo has become one of the most frequently cited text book examples in Zen Buddhism. Let's listen to it again in the light of the insights Koun Ejo has shared with us in recent kusen.

Wikipedia offers a fairly complete version of this exchange:

The Emperor asked:

"Since my accession to the throne, I have had many temples built, had numerous sutras copied, and appointed a large number of monks. How much merit have I acquired?"

"No merit," replied Bodhidharma.

"Why no merit?" asked the astonished emperor.

"All these acts are nothing more than impure sources of merit," replied Bodhidharma.

"They cause to ripen the illusory fruit of rebirth as a human being or as a deva (demigod). They are like shadows that follow form, without having any reality of their own. "

"Then what are true merits?" the emperor asked again.

"True knowledge. It is pure, marvellous and perfect; its essence is empty and peaceful. True merits cannot be acquired through worldly methods."

The emperor did not seem to truly understand and, in his naivety, asked again:

'What is the primary meaning of sacred truth?'

'All is emptiness; there is nothing sacred,' replied Bodhidharma.

Even more surprised and bewildered, the emperor, perplexed as to Bodhidharma's very identity [asked]:

"But who is standing before me?"

Bodhidharma's reply is utterly sublime and sheds light on the very essence of Awakening and of Buddhist practice:

"I do not know."

When we disappear as a self separate from the ten thousand things, in the deepest intimacy of our own being, what words could define what we are: there is no longer anyone left. Nor is there any longer any need to know.

When we are Mount Sumeru, the mountain, and nothing but Mount Sumeru - as vast as space - who is sitting there on the zafu?

No one! All identification with an illusory self has been abandoned.

Only someone who is Awakened can understand the *"I do not know"* of Bodhidharma's reply.
