

All the Zen lineages trace their ancestry back to the sixth ancestor Huineng, who, so the story goes, obtained a secret transmission from the fifth ancestor Hongren. In the story, Hongren asks his monks to write a poem about zazen. His chief disciple, Shenxiu, was the only one who responded. Huineng criticised the poem. In response, Hongren recognised Huineng as his true successor, and gave him transmission.

This is the poem, as often translated into English:

The body is the bodhi tree
 The mind the bright mirror
 At all times we should polish it
 And not let dust collect

However, the original Chinese reads something like:

Body is bodhi tree
 Mind like clear mirror stand
 At all times diligently polish
 Do not let dust settle

When we first hear the poem in its normal translation, we imagine that Shenxiu is talking about your body and your mind, and that your mind is like a bright mirror which needs to be kept clear of the dust of thoughts by the effort of Zazen. That ties in with an individualistic, mindful, psychological sense of what zazen is.

Except, the poem doesn't actually say that.

Let's consider the actual text.

The body is the bodhi tree. The bodhi tree is the tree under which the Buddha attained his enlightenment. So it is associated with that, obviously. But also, it is an unusual tree because it's hollow. So it's also a symbol of interdependence.

Is this the personal body, or not? Or both? Or neither?

When we hear that the mind is like a mirror, we form an image of a mirror, on a stand, in a room, that we polish through our effort, and so keep bright. But where in this image is the bodhi tree? Is it in the room, with the mirror, or not? And shouldn't the (personal) body be the stand of the mirror? And what is the stand anyway, and how does it relate to the mirror/mind?

The original text doesn't make clear who or what is being polished. The translations do, and it seems clear why. What would we be polishing, if not a mirror? It's obvious, isn't it?

But obviousness is the co-conspirator of deception.

If we rephrase it as something like "with vigorous effort, the dust does not settle anywhere", we may start to get somewhere.

If dust appears in vast space, moved here and there by the vigorous life of the air, both illuminated by light, there's no problem. The problem arises when the dust settles. Not because it becomes anything different, but because space is eradicated. There's just dust, and the dust becomes fixed. And what it comes to rest on becomes fixed too, as 'me', 'objective world', 'mirror', and so on.