

Why do we sit facing the wall? We could say we're re-enacting Bodhidharma, but what are we re-enacting?

In the customary telling, after his encounter with the Emperor, Bodhidharma went to Shaolin temple and faced the wall for nine years.

The Chinese phrase is pi kuan, which is usually rendered as 'wall contemplation'. It doesn't occur before Bodhidharma.

But given that he was not contemplating the wall, what does this mean, other than 'contemplation like a wall', or, more radically, 'the wall contemplates'? Whatever the actual location of Bodhidharma was, the primary meaning of the phrase has always been understood to be metaphorical, not literal.

In contemplation from the perspective of a person, we are likely to have the idea of present insufficiency and future gain. We may imagine that if all the inner and outer noise abated, Emptiness, Suchness might appear.

Contemplation from the perspective of the wall is entirely different. The wall is facing the person and facing the world, and all of it is a vivid, alive whole. Emptiness is immediately there. There is nothing to be eradicated, and nothing to gain. The wall is immovably grounded in great faith. We could equally say he spent nine years facing the ground, or the mountain, or vast space.