

CHINESE ZEN MASTERS

Lecture 2: The Illiterate Prodigy: Sixth Patriarch Huineng

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1. Faith in Mind—Third Patriarch Sengcan 三祖僧璨：信心銘

A layman over forty came to see the Second Patriarch Huike. He asked the Master, "I've been plagued by illness, please show me how to repent my sins." Huike said, "Bring me your sins, then I'll cleanse it for you." After a long contemplation, Sengcan said, "I cannot find it." Huike said, "You have repented your sins. Now abide in Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha." He ordained the layman and said, "You are a great jewel. I give you the name SengCan (Sangha-Jewel)." From then on Sengcan's illness gradually subsided. (Master Huike lived to be 107 years old and then was slandered and executed due to his popularity).

Not much is known about Third Patriarch Sengcan (三祖僧璨, d.606). He was forced to remain in hiding by the political persecution of Buddhism during his time, culminating in the order to destroy all monasteries in northern China in the years 574-577 by Emperor Zhou Wudi. His poem "Faith in Mind", however, has remained one of the most important and popular works of Zen throughout the generations.

(Excerpts from the Faith in Mind)
The Supreme Way is not difficult,
Unless you pick and choose.
Simply forsake love and hatred
And you will thoroughly understand.

A hairbreadth's difference
Sets heaven and earth apart.
For the Way to manifest,
Likes and dislikes must depart.

Intrinsically complete like vast space,
Without lack, without excess;
It is from grasping and rejecting,
That one becomes deficient.

The more you speak and ponder,
The less you concur with the Way.
Cease all talking and pondering,
And there is nowhere you cannot reach.

As soon as right and wrong arise,
The mind is scattered and lost.

With clinging one loses discernment
And will surely go astray.
Let everything go and be genuine
The Essence neither goes nor stays.

The wise make no efforts,
The fools entangle themselves.

The dharmas do not differ,
The deluded desire and cling.
The mind working itself up--
Is this not a great error?

The duality of all things
Comes from false discriminations.
In the Dharma Realm of True Suchness,
There are neither self nor others.

Have faith in the non-duality of mind;
Non-duality is faith in mind.
Beyond the realm of words and speech,
It is neither present, future, nor past.

2. Who Tied You Down?—Fourth Patriarch Daoxin 四祖道信：誰縛汝

The 14-year-old novice monk DaoXin visited the Third Patriarch Sengcan and said, “May the Master be so kind as to teach me the way to liberation.”

The Master said, “Who has bound you?”

“No one has bound me.”

“Then why are you seeking liberation?”

Upon these words, Daoxin experienced a great enlightenment.

Fourth Patriarch Daoxin (580-651) was born the year before China was reunified after 350 years of turbulence. He is the first in the Chan (Chinese Zen) lineage to have settled stably at the same monastery (on Twin Peaks Mountain) for thirty years, and built a large following of disciples. The new dynasties, Sui and Tang, were both sympathetic to the free practice of religions; Emperor Tang Taizong invited the Master to the royal court four times (which he refused). The next 260 years may be considered the golden age of Buddhism as all the ten major traditions of Chinese

Buddhism, including Chan, developed.

To set up a monastic system for such large Sangha, Master Daoxin is credited for bringing precepts, other schools of teaching such as Lankavatara Sutra, and the chanting of Heart Sutra into the daily practice of Zen monks.

3. A Child Without a Name—Fifth Patriarch Hongren 五祖弘忍：無姓兒

The Fifth Patriarch Hongren (601-674) was a Taoist in his previous life, and planted pine trees on Twin Peaks Mountain. He met Daoxin and asked about the Way. Daoxin said, “You’re too old. Even if I explain it to you, can you spread it widely? Come again [in the next life] and I’ll be waiting for you.”

The old Taoist left and met a girl washing clothes by the river. He asked her, “May I stay over at your place?”

The girl said, “My father and brothers are at home. You should ask them.”

The old man said, “If you grant me consent, then I will.”

She consented and the old man turned back and left.

Some time later the girl was found to be pregnant. Her father was furious and drove her out of the house. She made a living by making garments and passed the nights under others’ roofs. When she gave birth to a son, she feared he was a bad omen and left the baby in a sullied ditch. The next morning, she found the baby further upstream, bright and unblemished. Shocked, she kept and raised the child. Mother and son begged for food. The neighbors called him, “No-Name Child,” because he had no father.

The Fourth Patriarch Daoxin was in Yellow Plum County when he encountered this young boy on the road. The 7-year-old boy had unusually fine features. The Master asked him,

“What is your family name?”

The child replied, “I have a name, but it is no ordinary name.”

“What name is it?”

“It’s Buddha nature.” (In Chinese, “family name 姓” and “nature 性” are homonyms.)

The Master asked, “You don’t have a name? (You don’t have a nature?)”

The boy said, “No, because the nature is empty.”

Master Daoxin recognized that he is a vessel of the Dharma. He made a request of the boy’s mother, and she allowed him to become a monk. The boy eventually became Daoxin’s Dharma heir, the fifth Patriarch Hongren. He had over a thousand disciples in his Sangha.

4. Sixth Patriarch Huineng (638 ~ 713A.D.) 六祖慧能

The Illiterate Prodigy

HuiNeng was born into the Lu family in 638 A.D. His father died when he was young and his family was poor, so he did not have the chance to learn to read or write; he became a woodcutter. One day, while he was delivering firewood to an inn, he heard a guest reciting the Diamond Sutra and he immediately grasped its significance. Right then he decided to seek the Way of Buddhahood. The guest gave him ten taels of silver to provide for his mother, and HuiNeng embarked on his path. Thus began a remarkable page in Chinese Zen history.

After traveling for 30 days on foot, Huineng arrived at Huang Mei (Yellow Plum) Mountain, where the Fifth Patriarch Hongren presided.

Master Hongren asked the newcomer, “Where are you from? What do you seek?”

Huineng replied, “I am from Ling Nan (South of the Peaks—today’s Guangdong or Canton). I’ve come from far away to pay my respects to the master. I seek nothing else but to become a Buddha.”

Hongren said, “You come from the South, that makes you a barbarian. How can you become a Buddha?”

Huineng replied, “People may come from north or south, but the Buddha nature has no north or south. The body of a barbarian is different from Your Reverence’s, but what difference is there in our Buddha nature?”

Master Hongren knew he was special, but said harshly, “Don’t say anymore. Go do chores in the rice mill.” Whereupon Huineng stayed to chop wood and pound rice for eight months.

Bodhi Tree

One day, the Fifth Patriarch told the assembly of disciples, “Listen. The matter of birth and death is a great concern. All day long you only seek for (ephemeral) blessings, but do not seek to get out of the ocean of misery of birth and death. With your original nature deluded, how can blessings save you? Go now, look into your own wisdom, grasp your original prajna nature, and compose a gatha (poem) for me. If you’re awakened to the Great Essence, I will transmit the robe and the Dharma to you, making you the Sixth Patriarch. Go immediately without delay! Thinking about it is of no use. People who realize their essential nature should see it the moment I mention it. They do not lose sight of it even if they’re fighting on a battlefield.”

However, the disciples said to each other, “We don’t need to waste our effort writing gathas, surely the head monk and instructor, Venerable ShenXiu, will succeed and be the Sixth Patriarch. We’ll just follow Shenxiu in the future!”

The well-respected and learned head monk, Shenxiu, was under great pressure to produce a gatha that would qualify him as the next patriarch. He eventually decided to write a poem anonymously on the wall in the middle of the night:

*The body is a bodhi tree,
The mind a standing mirror bright;
At all times polish it diligently,
And let no dust alight.*

Bodhi is No Tree

This gatha on the wall created a stir among the disciples the next morning. When the Fifth Patriarch saw it, he told them, “Practice according to this gatha, you will not fall into the evil destinies, and you will receive great benefits. Light incense and pay respect to this gatha, recite it, and you will see your essential nature.” All the disciples praised and memorized the gatha.

However, privately, the Fifth Patriarch told Shenxiu, “You have arrived at the gate, but haven’t entered it. With this level of understanding, you still have no idea what the supreme bodhi mind is. Upon hearing my words, you should immediately recognize the original mind, the essential nature, which is unborn and unceasing. At all times, see it clearly in every thought, unhindered from everything. *When you see the truth of one thing, you see the truth of everything. All phenomena are just as they are.*” The Patriarch asked Shenxiu to compose another gatha that shows true understanding. Shenxiu tried hard but couldn’t come up with another verse.

When a young novice passed the rice mill chanting Shenxiu’s gatha, Huineng immediately knew this verse lacked true insight. He went to the wall, and asked a district officer there to write a poem of his own for him. The officer was surprised, “How extraordinary! You are illiterate, and you want to compose a poem?” Whereupon Huineng said, “If you seek the supreme enlightenment, do not slight anyone. The lowest person may have great insights, and the highest person may commit foolish acts.” With respect, the officer wrote Huineng’s gatha on the wall for him, next to Shenxiu’s. It read:

*Bodhi is no tree
Nor standing mirror bright;
Since all is originally empty,
Where can the dust alight?*

Huineng then went back to rice pounding. However, this gatha created a bigger stir; everyone was saying, “Amazing! You can’t judge a person by his appearance! Maybe he will become a living bodhisattva soon!” However, when the Fifth Patriarch saw the commotion, he casually said, “This (author) hasn’t seen the true nature either,” and wiped the gatha off with his shoe.

The Mind Acts Without Attachment

The next day, Patriarch Hongren came to the mill and asked Huineng, “Is the rice ready?” Huineng said, “It has been ready for a long time. It is only waiting for the sieve.”

That night the Fifth Patriarch received Huineng in his abode, and expounded the Diamond Sutra to him. When they came to the passage, “the mind should cling to nothing when it acts,” Huineng suddenly had a great enlightenment—that all dharmas are inseparable from the self nature. He exclaimed, “How amazing that the self nature is originally pure! How amazing that the self nature is unborn and undying! How amazing that the self nature is inherently complete! How amazing that the self nature neither moves nor stays! How amazing that all dharmas come from this self nature!”

The Fifth Patriarch told Huineng, “If one recognizes the original mind, the original nature, he is called a great man, a teacher of gods and humans, and a Buddha.” He passed the robe and begging bowl as a symbol of the Dharma Seal of the Sudden Enlightenment School to Huineng.

Escape

Since Huineng was lowly in social status and unlearned, the Fifth Patriarch had been protecting him from the jealousy of others since his arrival. Now that he had certified Huineng as the Dharma successor, he told Huineng to leave quickly and not to start teaching until much later. Hongren personally escorted Huineng to a river, and was about to ferry Huineng across, when Huineng said, “allow your disciple to row the boat.”

Master Hongren said, “It should be the master that ferries the disciple across.”

Huineng said, “When in delusion, the master ferries the boat; when awakened, one ferries oneself.”

Wind Moves? Flag Moves?

Master Huineng eventually back to the south and hid with a group of hunters for 15 years, eating only the vegetables that were mixed in with the meat. He taught the Dharma to the hunters and set the trapped animals free whenever he got the chance.

The day had come for him to spread the Dharma, and he arrived at a monastery where the abbot, Master YinZong, was preaching the Parinirvana Sutra. Out in the courtyard, a flag was flapping in the wind, and two monks were arguing below. One said, “The wind is moving.” The other said, “No, the flag is moving.” They could not reach a conclusion. Huineng came forth and said, “Neither the wind nor the flag is moving. It is your minds that are moving.”

When Master Yinzong heard these words, he questioned Huineng on the Dharma. Soon he was convinced that Huineng was the long sought-after Sixth Patriarch, and praised him, “My explanation of the sutra is like tile and gravel. Your elucidation of the Dharma is like pure gold.” Yinzong ordained Huineng but venerated Huineng as his own master. Thus began the Sixth Patriarch Huineng’s great teaching career.

5. Selections from the Platform Scripture

The Platform Scripture is a record of the Sixth Patriarch Huineng's teachings edited by his disciple FaHai. The chapters are: 1. Autobiography. 2. On Prajna. 3. Questions and Answers. 4. Samadhi and Wisdom. 5. On Zen Meditation. 6. On Repentance. 7. Case Studies 8. The Sudden and Gradual Schools 9. Imperial Summons. 10. Final Instructions. It has become the most important text on Chinese Zen Buddhism.

Bodhi nature

The Bodhi nature is originally clear and pure.

Using this present mind only, one directly attains Buddhahood.

菩提自性，本來清淨，但用此心，直了成佛

The wise and the foolish

The enlightened prajna wisdom is inherent in everyone, but you don't realize it because your mind is deluded. Therefore you need a great, knowledgeable master to explain and guide you to the essential nature. You should know that Buddha nature is the same in the wise and in the foolish. It is the difference between being deluded or awakened that makes one foolish or wise.

菩提般若之智。世人本自有之。只緣心迷。不能自悟。須假大善知識示導見性。當知愚人智人。佛性本無差別。只緣迷悟不同。所以有愚有智。

Original nature

The original nature *is* Buddha. There is no Buddha apart from this nature.

本性是佛。離性無別佛。

Great emptiness

The capacity of the mind is as great as the empty space. It has no boundaries. It is neither square nor round, neither blue, yellow, red, nor white; neither above nor below, neither long nor short, neither angry nor happy, neither right nor wrong, neither good nor evil, having no beginning and no end. All Buddha's lands are the same as space.... The empty space can contain all objects and forms, the sun, the moon, and the stars; it can contain the mountains, rivers, and earth, springs and creeks, grass, trees, forests, good people and evil people, good things and bad things, heaven and hell, all the oceans and great mountains like Mt. Sumeru. They are all in empty space. Our nature is empty in the same way.

Learned audience, the original nature can embrace all things, this is greatness. All dharmas are within our nature. If you see all the good and evil in people without grasping or rejecting, without clinging or become defiled, with the mind like empty space, this is greatness.

心量廣大。猶如虛空。無有邊畔。亦無方圓大小。亦非青黃赤白。亦無上下長短。亦無瞋無喜。無是無非。無善無惡。無有頭尾。諸佛剎土。盡同虛空.....世界虛空。能含萬物色像。日月星宿。山河大地。泉源溪澗。草木叢林。惡人善人。惡法善法。天堂地獄。一切大海。須彌諸山。總在空中。世人性空。亦復如是。

善知識。自性能含萬法是大。萬法在諸人性中。若見一切人惡之與善。盡皆不取不捨。亦不染著。心如虛空。名之為大。

Capacity of mind

The capacity of mind is as vast as the entire Dharma realm. Using it with comprehensive clarity, wherever it is applied it knows everything. Everything is one, and one is everything. The mind goes everywhere freely without hindrances. This is prajna.

心量廣大。遍周法界。用即了了分明。應用便知一切。一切即一。一即一切。來去自由。心體無滯。即是般若。

Immediate enlightenment

The ordinary person *is* a Buddha. Vexation is bodhi. One moment with a deluded mind you are an ordinary person; the next moment with the mind enlightened you are a Buddha. Clinging to sense-objects this moment is vexation; detaching oneself the next moment is bodhi.

凡夫即佛。煩惱即菩提。前念迷即凡夫。後念悟即佛。前念著境即煩惱。後念離境即菩提。

No-mind

What is no-mind? To see all things without attachment and defilement is no-mind. When we use it, the mind is everywhere, yet without abiding anywhere.

何名無念。若見一切法。心不染著。是為無念。用即徧一切處。亦不著一切處。

Whose fault?

A true cultivator does not see the faults of others.

If we see the faults of others, we ourselves are at fault.

若真修道人。不見世間過。若見他人非。自非卻是左。

Prajna practice

At all times, at all places, with not a single thought of foolishness, always acting in wisdom—this is the practice of prajna.

一切處所。一切時中。念念不愚。常行智慧。即是般若行。

Rabbit horns

The Buddha Dharma is for this world. There is no enlightenment apart from this world. To seek bodhi apart from this world is like seeking for horns on the rabbit.

佛法在世間。不離世間覺。離世覓菩提。恰如求兔角。

Mundane world

To have the right understanding is to transcend the mundane world. Having erroneous views is to be in the mundane world. 正見名出世。邪見名世間。

What is Zen meditation

What is *sitting in Zen meditation*? In this Dharma gate (i.e. Zen teaching) there are no obstacles and hindrances. When the mind is unperturbed by all external circumstances, be they good or bad—this is *sitting*. To realize the imperturbability of the original nature—this is *Zen*.

Good friends, what is *Zen samadhi*? To be free from the attachment of external objects is Zen. To attain inner peace is samadhi. If we cling to external objects, there will be no inner peace. To be free from such clinging is to attain peace of mind.

The essential nature is intrinsically pure and in samadhi. It is only because one becomes carried away by circumstances that one does not have peace. If the mind remains unperturbed by all circumstances, this is true samadhi.

何名坐禪。此法門中無障無礙。外於一切善惡境界。心念不起名為坐。內見自性不動名為禪。善知識。何名禪定。外離相為禪。內不亂為定。外若著相。內心即亂。外若離相。心即不亂。本性自淨自定。只為見境思境即亂。若見諸境心不亂者。是真定也。

Master Huineng's Influence

Huineng was a revolutionary figure in Chinese Zen in many ways. While most of the other masters were erudite and well-versed in the Buddha's teachings, he was illiterate but had a very keen intuition; while others were well established in famous monasteries, he had to hide for many years and gradually establish social acceptance; while Zen had a single transmission line in India, he decided to forsake the tradition and pass on the transmission widely; while others lectured using learned language replete with difficult Buddhist terminology, he used simple, direct words that reached the common people and yet always pointed to the essence. The record of his talks, the Platform Sutra, was exemplary in this way¹.

Huineng had dozens of enlightened disciples, who, along with their distinct personalities, taught Zen practice using different methods in different parts of China. Zen became very popular and by the end of the tenth century, the Five Houses of Zen had been formed. They are: the Linji (Japanese: Rinzai), Caodong (j. Soto), Guiyang, Yunmen, and Fayuan Schools. While the essence of their practice is the same as that of all other schools of Buddhism, i.e., to reach complete enlightenment, each of the different Houses supposedly developed its own distinct style of teaching.

During the Song Dynasty (10th-12th century), Zen had spread to Korea, Japan, and Vietnam, each country producing its own lineage of masters. Of the Five Houses, only the Linji and Caodong lineages continue until today. To this day, all forms of Zen practice in the world trace their root to Master Huineng.

6. Further Readings

- (1) Original Chinese Sources: 景德傳燈錄，五燈會元，六祖壇經，金剛經，指月錄
- (2) "Zen's Chinese Heritage: The Masters and Their Teachings" by Andy Ferguson, 2000, Wisdom Publications. *(A good reference book of translated Chinese Zen records.)*
- (3) "The Diamond Sutra and the Sutra of Hui-Neng" transl. by Price & Wong, 1990, Shambhala.
- (4) "The Sutra of Hui Neng, Grand Master of Zen" transl. by Thomas Cleary, 1998, Shambhala.
(While these two are decent translations of this great work (there are also others), none can capture the original in its beauty, profundity, and directness.)
- (5) "The Diamond Sutra" transl. by Red Pine, 2001, Counterpoint. *(A good recent reference on the Diamond Sutra. Even though I disagree with some of Red Pine's interpretations, the book is quite useful in its details and especially in the different interpretations on the Diamond Sutra by other Chinese masters, which were selectively compiled by Red Pine.)*

¹ The Platform Sutra is special in Chinese literature in that it is a profound teaching set in spoken, colloquial language. Almost all of the recorded teachings of later Zen Masters were influenced by this style and created a new genre of literature.