

Hui Neng

Autobiography

Learned Audience, our Essence of Mind (literally, self-nature) which is the seed or kernel of enlightenment (Bodhi) is pure by nature, and by making use of this mind alone we can reach Buddhahood directly. Now let me tell you something about my own life and how I came into possession of the esoteric teaching of the Dhyana (or the Zen) School.

My father, a native of Fan Yang, was dismissed from his official post and banished to be a commoner in Hsin Chou in Kwangtung. I was unlucky in that my father died when I was very young, leaving my mother poor and miserable. We moved to Canton and were then in very bad circumstances.

I was selling firewood in the market one day, when one of my customers ordered some to be brought to his shop. Upon delivery being made and payment received, I left the shop, outside of which I found a man reciting a sutra. As soon as I heard the text of this sutra my mind at once became enlightened. Thereupon I asked the man the name of the book he was reciting and was told that it was the Diamond Sutra. I further enquired whence he came and why he recited this particular sutra. He replied that he came from Tung Ch'an Monastery in the Huang Mei District of Ch'i

Chou; that the Abbot in charge of this temple was Hung Yen, the Fifth Patriarch; that there were about one thousand disciples under him; and that when he went there to pay homage to the Patriarch, he attended lectures on this sutra.

He further told me that His Holiness used to encourage the laity as well as the monks to recite this scripture, as by doing so they might realize their own Essence of Mind, and thereby reach Buddhahood directly.

It must be due to my good karma in past lives that I heard about this, and that I was given ten taels for the maintenance of my mother by a man who advised me to go to Huang Mei to interview the Fifth Patriarch. After arrangements had been made for her, I left for Huang Mei, which took me less than thirty days to reach.

I then went to pay homage to the Patriarch, and was asked where I came from and what I expected to get from him. I replied, "I am a commoner from

Hsin Chou of Kwangtung. I have travelled far to pay you respect and I ask for nothing but Buddhahood." "You are a native of Kwangtung, a barbarian? How can you expect to be a Buddha?" asked the Patriarch. I replied, "Although there are northern men and southern men, north and south make no difference to their Buddha-nature. A barbarian is different from Your Holiness physically, but there is no difference in our Buddha-nature." He was going to speak further to me, but the presence of other disciples made him stop short. He then ordered me to join the crowd to work.

"May I tell Your Holiness," said I, "that Prajna (transcendental Wisdom) often rises in my mind. When one does not go astray from one's own Essence of Mind, one may be called the 'field of merits'.

I do not know what work Your Holiness would ask me to do." "This barbarian is too bright," he remarked. "Go to the stable and speak no more." I then withdrew myself to the back yard and was told by a lay brother to split firewood and to pound rice.

More than eight months after, the Patriarch saw me one day and said, "I know your knowledge of Buddhism is very sound, but I have to refrain from speaking to you lest evil doers should do you harm. Do you understand?" "Yes, Sir, I do," I replied. "To avoid people taking notice of me, I dare not go near your hall." The Patriarch one day assembled all his disciples and said to them, "The question of incessant rebirth is a momentous one. Day after day, instead of trying to free yourselves from this bitter sea of life and death, you seem to go after tainted merits only (i.e. merits which will cause rebirth). Yet merits will be of no help if your Essence of Mind is obscured. Go and seek for Prajna (wisdom) in your own mind and then write me a stanza (gatha) about it. He who understands what the Essence of Mind is will be given the robe (the insignia of the Patriarchate) and the Dharma (the esoteric teaching of the Zen school), and I shall make him the Sixth Patriarch. Go away quickly.

Delay not in writing the stanza, as deliberation is quite unnecessary and of no use. The man who has realized the Essence of Mind can speak of it at once, as soon as he is spoken to about it; and he cannot lose sight of it, even when engaged in battle."

Having received this instruction, the disciples withdrew and said to one another, "It is of no use for us to concentrate our mind to write the stanza and submit it to His Holiness, since the Patriarchate is bound to be won by Shen Hsiu, our

instructor. And if we write perfunctorily, it will only be a waste of energy." Upon hearing this all of them made up their minds not to write and said, "Why should we take the trouble? Hereafter, we will simply follow our instructor, Shen Hsiu, wherever he goes, and look to him for guidance." Meanwhile, Shen Hsiu reasoned thus with himself. "Considering that I am their teacher, none of them will take part in the competition.

I wonder whether I should write a stanza and submit it to His Holiness. If I do not, how can the Patriarch know how deep or superficial my knowledge is? If my object is to get the Dharma, my motive is a pure one. If I were after the Patriarchate, then it would be bad. In that case, my mind would be that of a worldling and my action would amount to robbing the Patriarch's holy seat. But if I do not submit the stanza, I shall never have a chance of getting the Dharma. A very difficult point to decide, indeed!" In front of the Patriarch's hall there were three corridors, the walls of which were to be painted by a court artist, named Lu Chen, with pictures from the Lankavatara Sutra depicting the transfiguration of the assembly, and with scenes showing the genealogy of the five Patriarchs for the information and veneration of the public.

When Shen Hsiu had composed his stanza he made several attempts to submit it to the Patriarch, but as soon as he went near the hall his mind was so perturbed that he sweated all over. He could not screw up courage to submit it, although in the course of four days he made altogether thirteen attempts to do so.

Then he suggested to himself, "It would be better for me to write it on the wall of the corridor and let the Patriarch

see it for himself. If he approves it, I shall come out to pay homage, and tell him that it is done by me; but if he disapproves it, then I shall have wasted several years in this mountain in receiving homage from others which I by no means deserve! In that case, what progress have I made in learning Buddhism?" At 12 o'clock that night he went secretly with a lamp to write the stanza on the wall of the south corridor, so that the Patriarch might know what spiritual insight he had attained.

The stanza read:

Our body is the Bodhi-tree, And our mind a mirror bright.

Carefully we wipe them hour by hour, And let no dust alight.

As soon as he had written it he left at once for his room; so nobody knew what he had done. In his room he again pondered: "When the Patriarch sees my stanza tomorrow and is pleased with it, I shall be ready for the Dharma; but if he says that it is badly done, it will mean that I am unfit for the Dharma, owing to the misdeeds in previous lives which thickly becloud my mind. It is difficult to know what the Patriarch will say about it!" In this vein he kept on thinking until dawn, as he could neither sleep nor sit at ease.

But the Patriarch knew already that Shen Hsiu had not entered the door of enlightenment, and that he had not known the Essence of Mind.

In the morning, he sent for Mr. Lu, the court artist, and went with him to the south corridor to have the walls there painted with pictures. By chance, he saw the stanza. "I am sorry to have troubled you to come so far," he said to the artist. "The walls need not be painted now, as the Sutra says,

'All forms or phenomena are transient and illusive.' It will be better to leave the stanza here, so that people may study it and recite it. If they put its teaching into actual practice, they will be saved from the misery of being born in these evil realms of existence. The merit gained by one who practices it will be great indeed!" He then ordered incense to be burnt, and all his disciples to pay homage to it and to recite it, so that they might realize the Essence of Mind. After they had recited it, all of them exclaimed, "Well done!" At midnight, the Patriarch sent for Shen Hsiu to come to the hall, and asked him whether the stanza was written by him or not. "It was, Sir," replied Shen Hsiu. "I dare not be so vain as to expect to get the Patriarchate, but I wish Your Holiness would kindly tell me whether my stanza shows the least grain of wisdom." "Your stanza," replied the Patriarch, "shows that you have not yet realized the Essence of Mind. So far you have reached the 'door of enlightenment', but you have not yet entered it. To seek for supreme enlightenment with such an understanding as yours can hardly be successful.

"To attain supreme enlightenment, one must be able to know spontaneously one's own nature or Essence of Mind, which is neither created nor can it be annihilated. From ksana to ksana (thought-moment to thought-moment), one should be able to realize the Essence of Mind all the time. All things will then be free from restraint (i.e., emancipated). Once the Tathata (Suchness, another name for the Essence of Mind) is known, one will be free from delusion forever; and in all circumstances one's mind will be in a state of 'Thusness'. Such a state of mind is absolute Truth. If you can see things in such a frame of mind you will have known the Essence of Mind, which is supreme enlighten-

ment.

"You had better go back to think it over again for couple of days, and then submit me another stanza. If your stanza shows that you have entered the 'door of enlightenment', I will transmit you the robe and the Dharma." Shen Hsiu made obeisance to the Patriarch and left. For several days, he tried in vain to write another stanza. This upset his mind so much that he was as ill at ease as if he were in a nightmare, and he could find comfort neither in sitting nor in walking.

Two days after, it happened that a young boy who was passing by the room where I was pounding rice recited loudly the stanza written by Shen Hsiu.

As soon as I heard it, I knew at once that the composer of it has not yet realized the Essence of Mind. For although I had not been taught about it at that time, I already had a general idea of it.

"What stanza is this?" I asked the boy. "You barbarian," he replied, "don't you know about it? The Patriarch told his disciples that the question of incessant rebirth was a momentous one, that those who wished to inherit his robe and Dharma should write him a stanza, and that the one who had an understanding of the Essence of Mind would get them and be made the sixth Patriarch. Elder Shen Hsiu wrote this 'Formless' Stanza on the wall of the south corridor and the Patriarch told us to recite it. He also said that those who put its teaching into actual practice would attain great merit, and be saved from the misery of being born in the evil realms of existence." I told the boy that I wished to recite the stanza too, so that I might have an affinity with its teaching in future life. I also told him that although I had been pounding

rice there for eight months I had never been to the hall, and that he would have to show me where the stanza was to enable me to make obeisance to it.

The boy took me there and I asked him to read it to me, as I am illiterate. A petty officer of the Chiang Chou District named Chang Tih-Yung, who happened to be there, read it out to me. When he had finished reading I told him that I also had composed a stanza and asked him to write it for me.

"Extraordinary indeed," he exclaimed, "that you also can compose a stanza!" "Don't despise a beginner," said I, "if you are a seeker of supreme enlightenment. You should know that the lowest class may have the sharpest wit, while the highest may be in want of intelligence. If you slight others, you commit a very great sin." "Dictate your stanza," said he. "I will take it down for you. But do not forget to deliver me, should you succeed in getting the Dharma!" My stanza read:

There is no Bodhi-tree, Nor stand of a mirror bright.
Since all is Void, Where can the dust alight?

When he had written this, all disciples and others who were present were greatly surprised. Filled with admiration, they said to one another, "How wonderful! No doubt we should not judge people by appearance. How can it be that for so long we have made a Bodhisattva incarnate work for us?" Seeing that the crowd was overwhelmed with amazement, the Patriarch rubbed off the stanza with his shoe, lest jealous ones should do me injury.

He expressed the opinion, which they took for granted, that the author of this stanza had also not yet realized the Essence of Mind.

Next day the Patriarch came secretly to the room where the rice was pounded. Seeing that I was working there with a stone pestle, he said to me, "A seeker of the Path risks his life for the Dharma. Should he not do so?" Then he asked, "Is the rice ready?" "Ready long ago," I replied, "only waiting for the sieve." He knocked the mortar thrice with his stick and left.

Knowing what his message meant, in the third watch of the night I went to his room. Using the robe as a screen so that none could see us, he expounded the Diamond Sutra to me. When he came to the sentence, "One should use one's mind in such a way that it will be free from any attachment," I at once became thoroughly enlightened, and realized that all things in the universe are the Essence of Mind itself.

"Who would have thought," I said to the Patriarch, "that the Essence of Mind is intrinsically pure! Who would have thought that the Essence of Mind is intrinsically free from becoming or annihilation! Who would have thought that the Essence of Mind is intrinsically self-sufficient! Who would have thought that the Essence of Mind is intrinsically free from change! Who would have thought that all things are the manifestation of the Essence of Mind!" Knowing that I had realized the Essence of Mind, the Patriarch said, "For him who does not know his own mind there is no use learning Buddhism.

On the other hand, if he knows his own mind and sees intuitively his own nature, he is a Hero, a 'Teacher of gods and men', 'Buddha'." Thus, to the knowledge of no one, the Dharma was transmitted to me at midnight, and consequently I became the inheritor of the teaching of the 'Sudden' School as well as of the robe and the begging bowl.

"You are now the Sixth Patriarch," said he. "Take good care of yourself, and deliver as many sentient beings as possible. Spread and preserve the teaching, and don't let it come to an end. Take note of my stanza:

Sentient beings who sow the seeds of enlightenment
In the field of causation will reap the fruit of Buddhahood.

Inanimate objects void of Buddha-nature
Sow not and reap not.

He further said, "When the Patriarch Bodhidharma first came to China, most Chinese had no confidence in him, and so this robe was handed down as a testimony from one Patriarch to another. As to the Dharma, this is transmitted from heart to heart, and the recipient must realize it by his own efforts. From time immemorial it has been the practice for one Buddha to pass to his successor the quintessence of the Dharma, and for one Patriarch to transmit to another the esoteric teaching from heart to heart. As the robe may give cause for dispute, you are the last one to inherit it. Should you hand it down to your successor, your life would be in imminent danger. Now leave this place as quickly as you can, lest someone should do you harm." "Whither should I go?" I asked. "At Huai you stop and at Hui you seclude yourself," he replied.

Upon receiving the robe and the begging bowl in the middle of the night, I told the Patriarch that, being a Southerner, I did not know the mountain tracks, and that it was impossible for me to get to the mouth of the river (to catch a boat). "You need not worry," said he. "I will go with you." He then accompanied me to Kiukiang, and there ordered me into a boat. As he did the rowing himself, I asked him to sit down and let me handle the oar.

"It is only right for me to carry you across," he said (an allusion to the sea of birth and death which one has to go across before the shore of Nirvana can be reached). To this I replied, "While I am under illusion, it is for you to get me across; but after enlightenment, I should cross it by myself. (Although the term 'to go across' is the same, it is used differently in each case). As I happen to be born on the frontier, even my speaking is incorrect in pronunciation, (but in spite of this) I have had the honor to inherit the Dharma from you. Since I am now enlightened, it is only right for me to cross the sea of birth and death myself by realizing my own Essence of Mind." "Quite so, quite so," he agreed. "Beginning from you the Dhyana School will become very popular. Three years after your departure from me I shall leave this world. You may start on your journey now. Go as fast as you can towards the South. Do not preach too soon, as Buddhism is not so easily spread." After saying good-bye, I left him and walked towards the South. In about two months' time, I reached the Ta Yu Mountain. There I noticed that several hundred men were in pursuit of me with the intention of robbing me of my robe and begging bowl.

Among them there was a monk named Hui Ming, whose lay surname was Ch'en. He was a general of the fourth rank in lay life. His manner was rough and his temper hot. Of all the pursuers, he was the most vigilant in search of me. When he was about to overtake me, I threw the robe and begging bowl on a rock, saying, "This robe is nothing but a symbol. What is the use of taking it away by force?" (I then hid myself). When he got to the rock, he tried to pick them up, but found he could not. Then he shouted out, "Lay Brother, Lay Brother, (for the Patriarch had not yet formally

joined the Order) I come for the Dharma, not for the robe." Whereupon I came out from my hiding place and squatted on the rock. He made obeisance and said, "Lay Brother, preach to me, please." "Since the object of your coming is the Dharma," said I, "refrain from thinking of anything and keep your mind blank. I will then teach you." When he had done this for a considerable time, I said, "When you are thinking of neither good nor evil, what is at that particular moment, Venerable Sir, your real nature (literally, original face)?"

As soon as he heard this he at once became enlightened. But he further asked, "Apart from those esoteric sayings and esoteric ideas handed down by the Patriarch from generation to generation, are there any other esoteric teachings?" "What I can tell you is notesoteric," I replied. "If you turn your light inwardly, you will find what is esoteric within you." "In spite of my staying in Huang Mei," said he, "I did not realize my selfnature. Now thanks to your guidance, I know it as a water-drinker knows how hot or how cold the water is. Lay Brother, you are now my teacher." I replied, "If that is so, then you and I are fellow disciples of the Fifth Patriarch. Take good care of yourself." In answering his question whither he should go thereafter, I told him to stop at Yuan and to take up his abode in Meng. He paid homage and departed.

Sometime after I reached Ts'ao Ch'i. There the evildoers again persecuted me and I had to take refuge in Szu Hui, where I stayed with a party of hunters for a period as long as fifteen years.

Occasionally I preached to them in a way that befitted their understanding.

They used to put me to watch their nets, but whenever I found living creatures therein I set them free. At meal times I put vegetables in the pan in which they cooked their meat. Some of them questioned me, and I explained to them that I would eat the vegetables only, after they had been cooked with the meat.

One day I bethought myself that I ought not to pass a secluded life all the time, and that it was high time for me to propagate the Law. Accordingly I left there and went to the Fa Hsin Temple in Canton.

At that time Bhikkhu Yin Tsung, Master of the Dharma, was lecturing on the Maha Parinirvana Sutra in the Temple. It happened that one day, when a pennant was blown about by the wind, two Bhikkhus entered into a dispute as to what it was that was in motion, the wind or the pennant. As they could not settle their difference I submitted to them that it was neither, and that what actually moved was their own mind. The whole assembly was startled by what I said, and Bhikkhu Yin Tsang invited me to take a seat of honor and questioned me about various knotty points in the Sutras.

Seeing that my answers were precise and accurate, and that they showed something more than book-knowledge, he said to me, "Lay Brother, you must be an extraordinary man, I was told long ago that the inheritor of the Fifth Patriarch's robe and Dharma had come to the South. Very likely you are the man."

To this I politely assented. He immediately made obeisance and asked me to show the assembly the robe and the begging bowl which I had inherited.

He further asked what instructions I had when the Fifth Patriarch transmitted me the Dharma. "Apart from a discus-

sion on the realization of the Essence of Mind," I replied, "he gave me no other instruction, nor did he refer to Dhyana and Emancipation." "Why not?" he asked. "Because that would mean two ways," I replied. "And there cannot be two ways in Buddhism.

There is one way only." He asked what was the only way. I replied, "The Maha Parinirvana Sutra which you expound explains that Buddha-nature is the only way. For example, in that Sutra King Kao Kuei-Teh, a Bodhisattva, asked Buddha whether or not those who commit the four acts of gross misconduct [killing, stealing, carnality and lying] or the five deadly sins [patricide, matricide, setting the Buddhist Order in discord, killing an Arhat, and causing blood to flow from the body of a Buddha], and those who are icchantika (heretics) etc., would eradicate their 'element of goodness' and their Buddha-nature.

Buddha replied, 'There are two kinds of 'element of goodness', the eternal and the non-eternal. Since Buddha-nature is neither eternal nor non-eternal, therefore their 'element of goodness' is not eradicated. Now Buddhism is known as having no two ways. There are good ways and evil ways, but since Buddha-nature is neither, therefore Buddhism is known as having no two ways. From the point of view of ordinary folks, the component parts of a personality (skandhas) and factors of consciousness (dhatus) are two separate things: but enlightened men understand that they are not dual in nature. Buddha-nature is non-duality." Bhikkhu Yin Tsung was highly pleased with my answer. Putting his two palms together as a sign of respect, he said, "My interpretation of the Sutra is as worthless as a heap of debris, while your discourse is as valuable as genuine gold."

Subsequently he conducted the ceremony of hair-cutting for me (i.e., the ceremony of Initiation into the Order) and asked me to accept him as my pupil.

Thenceforth, under the Bodhi-tree I preached the teaching of the Tung Shan School (the School of the Fourth and the Fifth Patriarchs, who lived in Tung Shan).

Since the time when the Dharma was transmitted to me in Tung Shan, I have gone through many hardships and my life often seemed to be hanging by a thread.

Today, I have had the honor of meeting you in this assembly, and I must ascribe this to our good connection in previous kalpas (cyclic periods), as well as to our common accumulated merits in making offerings to various Buddhas in our past reincarnations; otherwise, we should have had no chance of hearing the above teaching of the 'Sudden' School, and thereby laying the foundation of our future success in understanding the Dharma.

This teaching was handed down from the past Patriarchs, and it is not a system of my own invention. Those who wish to hear the teaching should first purify their own mind, and after hearing it they should each clear up their own doubts in the same way as the Sages did in the past." At the end of the address, the assembly felt rejoiced, made obeisance and departed.

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