

The Wisdom of Huineng, Chinese Buddhist Philosopher

The Platform Sutra and Other Translations

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Foreword

Many years ago, I went to a Buddhist conference at the Liuzu Temple in Sihui, Guangdong Province with a short essay on Lin Yutang's involvement in Buddhist texts in English translation. At that time, I knew little about Buddhism. The only knowledge I had was Lin Yutang's selections from *The Lankavatara Sutra* and *The Surangama Sutra* which were included in his two anthologies of translations: *The Wisdom of China and India* and *The Importance of Understanding*. Those excerpts impressed me but did not impress me enough to arouse my interest in any other Buddhist texts.

At that conference, the scholar participants each were given a pack of Buddhist books, one of which was a trilingual edition of *The Platform Sutra*. I read the sutra with great interest.

The Platform Sutra says, "The moment your own original nature is lost, you become an average worldling. The moment your own original nature is awakened, you become a Buddha." It is indeed mind-blowing. This isn't about Buddhism. It's wonderful philosophy of life. The Buddha is not a deity; it is just you and me in our sober moments. It gives me a democratic vision of the world. There are no saints or sages in the world. In the sober moments, every one of us is a saint or a sage. Just like the social idea of "before the law everyone is equal," in spiritual matters, in the realization of truth, and in terms of human dignity, everyone is equal. Isn't that spirit what is exactly lacking in the hierarchical society of China and the visible and invisible hierarchical societies and institutions of the world that prevent people from knowing truth by ingraining in us a set of false truths? This involves a basic human right to truth. There are too many people in history and too many people in the world set to brainwash us while they themselves have been brainwashed in their turn. If everyone realizes this basic right to truth, there will be true progress of history and we shall have no fear of the things that kidnap and blackmail us every day, and we shall be free.

The Platform Sutra also has great implications for education. Although it is written for Buddhist education, its idea of education applies to all education. Educators should read it. The purpose of education is to get the meaning not the words and signs and procedures. Currently, the education systems are designed to trap students in a web of science and pseudoscience with the true meaning hidden in the sophisticated and often misleading signs, procedures and formulas. What is the purpose of education? We are often teaching students to get jobs instead of the wisdom good for any job. We teach whatever to keep our own jobs instead of the truth. We often flatter students like actors and actresses by telling them what they want to hear instead of what they should hear. We pretend to be saints and sages or possessors of knowledge. Seldom do we admit we in fact do not necessarily know more than they do. The true purpose of education is to get the students on the way and on their own. There is a passage that particularly appeals to me:

Having received the robe and the alms bowl at the third watch of the night, I said to the Master,
"I am a southerner and have no idea of the mountain roads here. How can I make it to the riverside?"

He said, "Not to worry. I will go with you."

He escorted me all the way to Jiujiang Ferry, where he bade me get on a boat. Taking the oars into his hands, he started to row the boat.

I said, "Master, please be seated. It should be me to work the oars."

He said, "It is me who should carry you to the other shore."

I said, "When I was lost, it was up to the teacher to carry me across. Now I am enlightened, I should carry myself across. Carrying differs from carrying despite the use of the same word. Thanks

to your transmission I am now enlightened. Therefore, I should carry myself across by virtue of my own original nature."

Isn't it the purpose of real education to empower the students so that they can carry themselves across to the other shore? *The Platform Sutra* is an apocalypse for our educators. Truth is just a step away or it's there already. The important thing is to bring about an awareness of truth and then let truth guide our actions. It's not difficult to act, but it's difficult to act wisely. The idea of sudden enlightenment is a revolutionary idea. It helps us to get rid of hindrances to the realization of truth. To speak the truth takes courage, and Huineng had that courage long ago.

The Platform Sutra fascinates also because it is good literature. It is supposed to be the record of Huineng's life story and teachings by his immediate disciples but in fact it is the wisdom and wit of generations of Chan Buddhists combined. From the handwritten Dunhuang archive copy to the latest Zongbao edition, the sutra has undergone significant rewritings so that today it is good literature to the Chinese and one of the must-reads for Chinese high school students. Much of the book is allegorical truth, like Zhuangzi. In reading *The Platform Sutra*, we shall bear in mind that it is spiritual and aesthetic experience rather than historical truth though there is indeed some historical truth. One interesting allegory is about Huineng's rightful inheritance of the alms bowl and robe from his predecessor. Thus speaks *The Platform Sutra*:

A few days passed. His disciples began to be suspicious. They went to him and said, "Master, is there anything that ails you or bothers you? "

He replied, "I am very well. The robe and the Dharma went south."

Upon being asked who received them, he said, "Neng, the Able." So it was known to the disciples. Monk Huiming, whose secular name was Chen, had been a military officer of the fourth order. He was coarse and rustic. Bent on finding me he took the lead among my pursuers. On the point of his approaching me, I threw the robe and bowl onto a stone.

I said to myself, "This robe represents the faith. Can it be taken by force?"

I hid myself in a thick growth of grass. He got to the spot and tried to take it without success.

He said, "Sir! I am after the Dharma, not the robe and bowl. Then I came out from hiding and sat legs-folded on the stone.

He bowed to me and said, "Sir! Please educate me on the Dharma."

I said, "Now that you are after the Dharma, please hold your breath and stop all the accessory conditions. Think nothing. Then, I shall speak to you."

The later disciples of Huineng gave supernatural powers to the bowl and robe to make the story of Huineng a legend. That in no way shall prevent our understanding of the wisdom of Huineng. On the contrary, it adds appeal to the story.

People in *The Platform Sutra* often spoke in a semi-poetic fashion, combining literature and truth in the semi-poems called gathas.

After the Dharma transmission, Huineng's master said to him:

As long as there is sentience,

Seeds are sown.

On the land of cause,

Fruits of effect are produced.

When sentience is absent,

Seeds are not present.
If there is no nature,
There is nothing to nurture.
When teaching Zhichang, Huineng said in a gatha:
To speak of not seeing without seeing anything

Is like to have the floating clouds hiding the sun.
To cling to emptiness without knowing anything

Is like to have a thunderbolt in the sky.
To have the idea of seeing and knowing
Is a wrong way to accessing the Truth.
You shall be aware of your own faults in a flash of your genius.
Having understood Huineng's instruction, Zhichang also said in a gatha:
In the pursuit of Bodhi,
Seeing and knowing are also attachments to appearances.
May I be suddenly enlightened
And be free of all delusions of the past!
My self-nature is the original carrier of the ultimate truth.
The circumstances make it drift in vain.
Had I not met the Grand Master,
I would still be blindly pursuing the two ends
Instead of truth itself.

The Platform Sutra is also a great masterpiece for moral education. It denounces all vanities, all possessions and all pursuits of superficial things for the self. Thus speaks Huineng of delusions:

The true self-nature is the real Buddha.

Delusions and the three poisons are the greatest demons.

In times of delusion,

The demons possess the house.

In times of correct understanding,

The Buddha makes his presence.

And he thus denounces greed:

Greed is the cause for the purification of nature.

When greed is no more,

There is the body of pure nature.

The moment the five desires are cleared,

Self-nature is manifest and truth revealed.

For Huineng, real freedom comes with not seeking good for oneself and not doing harm to others:

In quietness, do not seek good for yourself.

In commotion, do not do evil to others.

In perfect peace, cut off all sounds and sights.

In a vast void, let the soul be free.

Philosophically Huineng gives us a way to look at the world with a distance. His approach is formulated as three perspectives and thirty-six pairs of opposites:

The three perspectives are: *skandha*, *dhatu* and *ayatana* (aggregate, element and sphere). There are five skandhas, which are the five types of phenomena: substance, impression, perception, activity, and consciousness. There are twelve dhatus: the six kinds of dusts on the outside: visual dust, aural dust, olfactory dust, gustatory dust, tactile dust and dharmic dust, and the six gates on the inside: eyes, the nose, the tongue, the body and the mind. There are eighteen ayatanas: six kinds of dusts, six gates, and six kinds of consciousness. Self-nature accommodates everything. It is also called 'the hidden consciousness.' When thinking starts, the process of conversion of self-nature to consciousness is activated, giving rise to the six kinds of consciousness, which exit the six gates to see the six kinds of dusts. Therefore, all the eighteen spheres can trace back to self-nature. Deviation from self-nature gives rise to eighteen spheres of evil. Integrity of self-nature leads all the way to eighteen spheres of good. Misuse of self-nature is the way of the vulgar people. Proper use of it is the way of the Buddha. Both good use and bad use originate in self-nature. What are the pairs of opposites? In regard to the insentient surroundings, there are five pairs of opposites: heaven vs. earth, sun vs. moon, light vs. darkness, *yin* vs. *yang*, and water vs. fire. In discussion of things in relation to the Dharma of the Buddha, there are twelve pairs of opposites: words vs. meaning, presence vs. absence, reality vs. non-reality, form vs. formlessness, leak vs. leaklessness, entity vs. void, activity vs. inactivity, purity vs. impurity, vulgarity vs. nobility, saintliness vs. meanness, old age vs. youth, and bigness vs. smallness. For the discussion of the functioning of self-nature, there are twelve pairs of opposites: strength vs. weakness, evil vs. good, ignorance vs. wisdom, stupidity vs. intelligence, chaos vs. order, kindness vs. malignance, discipline vs. dissipation, uprightness vs. crookedness, reality vs. non-reality, danger vs. safety, suffering vs. liberation, permanence vs. impermanence, love vs. hate, joy vs. pain, generosity vs. stinginess, progress vs. retrogress, life vs. death, dharma body vs. physical body, and avatar body vs. body of fulfillment. (The Great Master's Last Words, *The Platform Sutra*, Chapter 10)

His method of thirty-six pairs of opposites applies to all phenomena to enable one to distance themselves from extremes. We may not follow his exact categories but this approach does open up a critical vision for us to see the world more clearly.

The language of the Chinese sutra is comparatively simple. It's not like the language of other Chinese language Buddhist sutras. Many people say of all the Chinese language sutras, this one is the most accessible. The English translation in the gift book I received at the conference is the work of a monk, who is supposed to have a good understanding of the sutra. As a university teacher of translation, the moment I laid hand on the book, I read the translation and found it strange. I thought to myself: "Maybe I can make another translation."

It happened that Prof. Jia Haitao was organizing a Buddhist class in Jinan University and wanted me to teach a course called Readings of Buddhist Literature in English. I happily accepted his invitation and used that gift book as a textbook. In the course of teaching, I found a lot of mistranslations in it and discussed them

with my Buddhist students. They liked my analysis from the linguistic point of view. One of them, a nun, came to me and said, “Mr. Chu, although you say you haven’t read any sutras yet, your understanding of *The Platform Sutra* is very good. I have fellow monastics who have read a lot but do not have a good understanding of it.” That greatly encouraged me. I don’t have to be a Buddhist to translate the Buddhist sutra. As long as I can understand it and have the required linguistic devices, I can do a good job. Anyone can translate the sutra, just like anyone can read it. A thousand people may read it in a thousand ways and a hundred translators may translate it in a hundred ways. At least I can make a translation based on my understanding. If someone finds my understanding good in any way I am also making a contribution to the understanding of this masterpiece classic. While earlier translations have found their readers, one more translation does no harm.

I have not read all the existing translations to make a new one, but I have indeed browsed through some of them to get inspired, each of them having their own merit. I have been trying to make a translation I am comfortable with, something as readable as Max Müller’s translation of *The Dhammapada*, if not as good.

One common problem I spot in the existing translations is the translation of the word *mingjingtai* in the two well-known semi-poems. The latter of the two poems is in the knowledge of primary school children in Guangdong Province. An early translation by Wong Mou-Lam¹ reads:

Our body may be compared to the Bodhi-tree;
While our mind is a mirror bright.
Carefully we cleanse and watch them hour by hour,
And let no dust collect upon them. (*A Buddhist Bible*: 223)

Neither is there Bodhi-tree,
Nor case of mirror bright.
Since intrinsically all is void
Where can dust collect? (*A Buddhist Bible*: 226)

The two poems are found in a translation of *The Platform Sutra* which was completed in 1929. It is anthologized by Goddard’s *A Buddhist Bible* and was revised by C. Humphreys in 1952. As the earliest known translator of the sutra, Mr. Wong no doubt has made a great contribution to the spread of this classic. However, there are at least two places where he has erred, not to say whether or not the English is good. The Chinese word *shishi* means “from moment to moment,” “constantly,” “from time to time.” Wong says “hour by hour”, which is an over-literal translation. His understanding of *mingjingtai* as “mirror bright” in the first poem is good but in the second poem, he says it is “case of mirror bright.” That is very strange. The mind as a mirror is a well known Chan metaphor. The mind is a mirror that never tires of mirroring things. That is the idea emphasized by Huineng and his disciples. Huineng and some other Buddhist monks were not very well educated. Very often their poems called gathas were simply like rhymes or doggerels. They did not care if every word was exact. In the case of *mingjingtai*, it is just a mirror, and the *tai* is merely a superfluous sound to give a rhyme. While Mr. Wong is in two minds about what *tai* is, later translators unfortunately often borrowed his understanding. For example, in *The Sixth Patriarch’s Dharma Jewel Platform Sutra*² Hengyin’s translation of the two poems reads:

The body is a Bodhi tree,
The mind like a bright mirror stand.
Time and again brush it clean,

¹ In Goddard, Dwight. *A Buddhist Bible* (First Edition). Thetford, Vermont: MDMXXII, 1932.

² Hengyin (Tr.). *The Sixth Patriarch’s Dharma Jewel Platform Sutra, With the Commentary of Tripitaka Master Hua*. U.S.A.: Buddhist Text Translation Society, 2001

And let no dust alight. (p. 67)

Originally Bodhi has no tree,
The bright mirror has no stand.
Originally there is not a single thing:
Where can dust alight? (p. 75)

In *The Sutra of Huineng, Grand Master of Zen*³, Thomas Cleary's translation reads:

The body is the tree of enlightenment,
The mind is like a clear-mirror stand.
Polish it diligently time and again,
Not letting it gather dust. (p. 8)

Enlightenment originally has no tree,
And a clear mirror is not a stand.
Originally there is not a single thing —
Where can dust be attracted? (P. 10)

In *The Platform Sutra of the Sixth Patriarch*⁴, McRae's translation reads:

The body is the *bodhi* tree;
The mind is like a bright mirror's stand.
Be always diligent in rubbing it—
Do not let it attract any dust. (p. 20)

Bodhi is fundamentally without any tree;
The bright mirror is also not a stand.
Fundamentally there is not a single thing—
Where could any dust be attracted? (p. 22)

In *The Platform Sutra of the Sixth Patriarch*⁵, Philip B. Yampolsky translates *mingjingtai* into “a clear mirror” in the first instance but “mirror...stand” in the second instance:

The body is the Bodhi tree,
The mind is like a clear mirror.
At all times we must strive to polish it,
And must not let the dust collect. (p. 130)

Bodhi originally has no tree,
The mirror also has no stand.
Buddha nature is always clean and pure;
Where is there room for dust? (p. 132)

³ Cleary, Thomas (Tr). *The Sutra of Hui-Neng, Grand Master of Zen*. Boston & London: Shambhala, 1998.

⁴McRae, John R. *The Platform Sutra of the Sixth Patriarch*. Berkeley: Numata Center for Buddhist Translation and Research, 2000.

⁵ Yampolsky, Philip B. *The Platform Sutra of the Sixth Patriarch*. New York and London: Columbia University Press, 1967.

In *The Platform Sutra: The Zen Teaching of Hui-neng*⁶, Red Pine's translation (also based on the Dunhuang manuscript) reads:

The body is a bodhi tree
the mind is like a standing mirror
always try to keep it clean
don't let it gather dust.

Bodhi doesn't have any trees

this mirror does not have a stand
our Buddha nature is forever pure
where do you get this dust?

Thanks to their efforts, I have been able to piece together a complete understanding of the poems:

The body is a bodhi tree.
The mind is a mirror bright.
Never stop dusting and wiping,
Lest dust alight.

By origin there is no bodhi tree,
Nor is there a mirror bright.
Originally there is not a single thing,
Where does dust alight?

One difficulty in the translation of *The Platform Sutra* lies in the Buddhist jargon resulting from an over-literal translation or transliterations of Sanskrit words. These words, after having been translated into Chinese, have taken on new meanings. A case in point is the Sanskrit word *dhyana* (meditation). It has been translated into *chan* according to its meaning and *ding* according to its sound. Then *chan* and *ding* combined become a new Chinese word *chanding*. Huineng and his disciples spoke of what is *chanding* in terms of what is *chan* and what is *ding*. Here, not translating the words is irresponsible, for that leaves the English reader clueless, but translating it involves another problem: we cannot translate it into "meditation meditation," for that is also nonsensical. *Ding* is originally a transliteration, but the Chinese are reading what that Chinese character originally means into the transliteration. Therefore, frequently it has connotations of tranquility, peace, or being motionless or settled down. In such cases, wherever possible the words are translated, whether impossible, transliteration is done with proper links to build a textual coherence. I must thank my philosopher friend Timothy Huson, whose interest in Chinese philosophy has influenced me and who has been following every word of my translation with sharp criticism of the translation of the Buddhist terms. Up to this day, he is not satisfied with my solutions.

The translations of the earlier translators came up with the timely translation for their times. I don't think I am a better translator for the translation of every word and sentence. Maybe where they have not erred I have made some mistakes. I have done my best to consult various sources to make sure I get the meaning and more importantly that my readers can read with as great ease as possible.

In the last chapter of *The Platform Sutra*, when Huineng told his students that he was dying soon, all of them wept except Shenhui, whom Huineng praised. He said, "Shenhui is the youngest here but he alone

⁶ Red Pine (Tr.). *The Platform Sutra: The Zen Teaching of Hui-neng*, translation and commentary. Berkeley: Counterpoint, 2006. Kindle ebook.

understands that good and bad are the same. He is disturbed by neither loss nor gain, neither pain nor joy. The rest of you do not get it.” It was the student who did not weep that turned out to be the leading apostle of Huineng.

While I was translating *The Platform Sutra*, I found Dr. Hu Shi’s edition of *Shen Hui Yu Lu* (*Thus Spoke Shenhui*), which also greatly interested me. Shenhui was Huineng’s favorite student and leading campaigner to make Huineng’s teaching the official Buddhist teaching in China. His debates with other Buddhist masters are important in the history of Buddhism in China, but what attracts me more is that in a country of conformity to social establishment where people give each other face this should ever have happened at all. To clarify truth — whether what Shenhui defended is truth or not does not matter — through arguing in open debates is what has been lacking in China, though I do not approve of all of his debating tactics. The most powerful thing in the world is ideas, not bombs, according to Lin Yutang. If the world can forget physical annihilation of ideological rivals and let the ideas clash head-on, how much more human will it be! Many bad things have become established facts. The world shall be free of the holy cows. Therefore, I have also translated Shenhui’s sermons delivered from the Dharma platform and a record of Shenhui’s discourse on the correct doctrine of the Southern School of Chan Buddhism.

In addition, I have also translated some historical documents that go with the Zongbao edition of *The Platform Sutra* and some other related texts to help readers understand the historical significance of the teachings of Huineng and Shenhui. Those documents are a great challenge to translators. I have done my best to find meaning between the lines of the illusive words by using contextual and cross-contextual clues in hopes of not disappointing English readers too much.

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Part One: The Idea of Sudden Enlightenment

Huineng (often spelt Hui-neng or Hui Neng, 638-713) is one of the major Chinese sages. Known as Liuzu, he was the Sixth Grand Master of Chan, often translated as the Sixth Patriarch, the word *zu* itself meaning ancestor or progenitor. His school, known as the School of Sudden Enlightenment or, historically, the Southern School of Chan Buddhism, in effect started a populist democratic tradition in hierarchical feudal China, not only in Buddhism but also in Chinese society at large. The belief that enlightenment is in oneself and can be obtained immediately by anyone is in fact a democratic ideal, which levels divisions between rich and poor, king and subjects, ruler and ruled, men and women, clergy and laity, literate and illiterate, and gods and humans, in fact all the divisions between all sentient things. The allegedly illiterate monk in his later years recruited a student, a child prodigy called Shenhui (668~760 A. D.), who turned out to be an excellent scholar of Chinese philosophy and carried on his teachings. In exposing a fake Seventh Grand Master, Shenhui established the distinction between the School of Sudden Enlightenment and the School of Gradual Enlightenment, or the Southern School and the Northern School. He is very much responsible for Huineng's teachings becoming the officially sanctified orthodox Buddhist teachings in China.

In the present section, Huineng will be interpreted through Shenhui. The section consists of a new translation of *The Platform Sutra*, a translation of Shenhui's "*Xian Zong Ji*" — Shenhui's sermon on "the origin" — and a translation of two documents recording the words of Shenhui: "Platform Talk of the Monk of Nanyang on the Direct Understanding of the Original Nature in the Chan Doctrine of Salvation via Sudden Enlightenment" and "A Definition of Right and Wrong by the Southern School of Bodhidharma." There are many English translations of *The Platform Sutra*, but the words of Shenhui have never been completely translated into English.

1. The Platform Sutra

The Platform Sutra

A Quick Introduction to Buddhism by Huineng, Sixth Grand Master of Chan

(The Sixth Grand Master's Platform-of-Gems-of-the-Dharma Sutra)

六祖大师法宝坛经

Edited by Bhikshu Zongbao, Abbot of the Guang Xiao Monastery

Translator's Note:

The Platform Sutra, a record of the life and teachings of Huineng, is widely read by Chinese Buddhists as a religious text and for that reason it does not receive due attention from non-Buddhist readers as part of the canon of Chinese philosophy. However, one does not have to be a Buddhist to read the sutra. It is quite possible that a lay reader without religious zeal may learn more from the sutra than a devout Buddhist.

The Zongbao edition is the basis of the translation, but in the course of translation references have been made to three other major editions to ensure the integrity of the sutra. The Zongbao edition is the latest major edition, which is the most beautiful and reflects the latest development of Chan Buddhism.

The texts I have referred to include, among others, *Tang Jing* (Feng, 2005, an annotated version of the Zongbao edition), *Liu Zu Da Shi Fa Bao Tan Jing* (Lirong Publishing, undated, based on the Qisong edition), and *Tan Jing Dui Kan* (Guo et al, 1981, a paragraph-by-paragraph comparison of four major editions).

Chapter 1. The Story of Huineng's Enlightenment

The Grand Master arrived in the Baolin Monastery. Wei, Commissioner of Shaozhou⁷, went to the mountains with other officials to request the honor of the master's presence at the Dafan Monastery in town to explain to the public the Dharma of the Buddha. The master took his seat. It was an audience of over one thousand people, including His Honor the Commissioner and more than thirty other officials, more than thirty Confucian scholars, and over a thousand monks and nuns. Together they bowed to the master and were eager to hear the essentials of the Dharma.

This is what the Grand Master said to the audience:

Bodhi as self-nature is clear and pure. Simply exert your mind and you become a Buddha.

Good friends! Here's my story of enlightenment.

My father was from Fanyang. He was exiled to the South of the Five Ridges, where he became a peasant. While the circumstances were bad enough, my father died. My mother and I, widow and orphan, moved to Nanhai, where poverty saw me selling firewood in the marketplace in town.

There was a buyer, who asked me to take the firewood to an inn. He received the firewood and paid me. I stepped out and was leaving the inn, when I saw a client of the inn reciting a sutra. I listened to the sutra and my mind opened up. I was enlightened.

Then I asked what sutra it was. The man replied, "*The Diamond Sutra*."

I asked, "Where did you get it?"

He replied, "I got it from the Eastern Chan Monastery in Huangmei County, Qizhou Prefecture. The abbot is Hongren, the Fifth Grand Master. He has over one thousand disciples. I went on a pilgrimage to the monastery and heard the sutra explained. The master often said to the monastics and householders that by reading *The Diamond Sutra* alone one can see self-nature and directly become a Buddha."

Shortly after I heard this, thanks to previous karma, a guest of the inn produced 10 *liang* of silver and offered it to me so that my mother would have food and clothing in my absence. He bade me see the Fifth Grand Master in Huangmei.

⁷ Shaozhou is an ancient Chinese prefecture, including what is now Shaoguan City in the north of Guangdong Province.

I made sure everything was taken care of for my mother and took leave.

In less than thirty days I arrived in Huangmei. I bowed to the Fifth Grand Master.

He said, "Where are you from and what are you here for?"

"This pupil of yours is a peasant in Xinzhou to the South of the Five Ridges. I have come a long way to see you in hopes of becoming a Buddha and I want nothing else," I replied.

The master said, "You are from South of the Five Ridges and you are a lowly creature. How can you expect to be a Buddha? "

I replied, "There are southerners and northerners but there is no south-north distinction in Buddha-nature. Country bumpkins are different from monks, but there is no difference in terms of Buddha-nature."

The Fifth Grand Master wanted more conversation with me, but felt the presence of his followers a hindrance. He bade me work among the others.

I said, "Master, this pupil of yours often produces wisdom from his mind. Adherence to one's own nature is blessing. May I know what work I can do? "

The master said, "This country bumpkin has very sharp roots by nature. Don't say anything else." He sent me to the stable.

I withdrew to the backyard. One of the master's attendants assigned me the job of splitting firewood and pounding rice.

Eight months passed.

One day, the Grand Master saw me and said, "Your ideas are quite good. I cut short our conversation lest you be persecuted by some evil men. Do you understand this? "

"Yes, I do," I said. "Therefore I dare not walk to the front of the main hall so that I will not be noticed."

One day, the master summoned his disciples and said, "Let me tell you this. For humans, the only thing that really matters is the issue of life and death. All of you are merely concerned with the pursuit of blessings and do not have the desire to escape from the miserable sea of life and death. If self-nature is lost, blessings are no remedy. I want each of you to look for your own wisdom and write me a gatha inspired by your own prajna nature. The one whose gatha shows his enlightenment will receive the robe and the Dharma transmission to become the Sixth Grand Master. Please go and do not hesitate. Thinking is no use. One who sees self-nature sees it now. Thus, even an armored man in battle action can see self-nature."

The disciples took the bidding and retired, saying to one another, "We common folks do not have to bother our minds fumbling for a gatha to be submitted to the abbot. What is the good in doing so? Shenxiu is our elder and is now the monastery's instructor. It must be him to get the robe and the Dharma transmission. It is inappropriate for any of us to write a gatha. And it is a waste of the labor of our minds."

Everybody heard it and withdrew from the idea of trying, saying, "We are behind and depend on the instructor. Why the bother for a gatha? "

Shenxiu thought, "The others do not submit their gathas because I am their instructor. I shall write a gatha and submit it to the abbot. Should I not submit a gatha, how could the abbot know the depth of my understanding? My intention is a good one if my submission is driven by my desire to obtain the Dharma. It is a bad one if my submission is driven by my desire to be the next Grand Master. In the latter case, the submission itself betrays a vulgar heart coveting a sacred position. Should I not submit a gatha, I would never be able to obtain the Dharma. What a dilemma!"

In front of the Fifth Grand Master's room, there was a corridor three rooms long, where the treasures of the monastery were to be placed and on whose walls were to be painted scenes from *The Lankavatara Sutra* and the Five Grand Masters in succession to be worshiped by more people. Shenxiu wrote a gatha and attempted several times to hand it in. Every time he walked to the master's room, his mind became unsure and he sweated. He was unable to submit the gatha.

Four days passed and he made a total of thirteen attempts.

Shenxiu thought to himself, "I may as well write it on the wall of the corridor. The abbot will see it later. If he likes it, I will come out from hiding, bow to him and claim the authorship. If he dislikes it, my years of accepting respect in the mountain monastery have been in vain and how can I expect to attain to the ultimate wisdom?"

At the third watch of that night, without being noticed, Shenxiu held a lamp and wrote on the wall of the south corridor what his mind's eye had seen. The gatha read thus:

The body is a bodhi tree.
The mind is a mirror bright.
Never stop dusting and wiping,
Lest dust alight.

After writing this, he returned to his room. Nobody noticed. He thought to himself, "Tomorrow, if the Fifth Grand Master is pleased with the gatha, I have a karmic affinity with the Dharma. If he does not like it, I

am still deluded and not qualified to receive the Dharma transmission because the hindrance of my past karma is still strong and heavy. There is no knowing the intention of His Grace." He thought and thought. He was restless in his room until the fifth watch.

The Fifth Grand Master knew that Shenxiu had not crossed the threshold and did not see self-nature. At daybreak, the Fifth Grand Master sent for Lu the artist to paint a mural on the wall of the south corridor, when suddenly he spotted the gatha. He said to the artist, "Now, there is no need to paint the mural. Sorry for the distance you have traveled. *The Diamond Sutra* says, 'Everything that has an appearance is an illusion.' Leave the gatha on the wall. Let it be recited. Self-cultivation according to it prevents one from falling into evil abysses and creates great benefits."

He asked his disciples to burn incense and bow to the gatha, saying that one can see self-nature after reciting it. The disciples recited it. They marveled at its profundity.

At the third watch that night, the Fifth Grand Master summoned Shenxiu to his room and said, "Did you write that gatha?"

"Yes, I did," Shenxiu replied, "I do not make so bold as to seek the position of the Sixth Grand Master. I do hope that Your Grace out of compassion can tell me if this student of yours has a little wisdom."

The Fifth Grand Master said, "This gatha of yours has not revealed self-nature. It is close to the door but it does not cross the threshold. The understanding as shown is insufficient for the attainment of the supreme bodhi. The supreme bodhi is attained to the moment it is spoken of. It is recognized in your own mind. It is seen in your own nature. There's no coming into being nor going out of being. In the endless time stream of past, present and future, flashes of thought reveal themselves one after another. All things flow in an eternal flux. One truth permeates everything. All realms are from the same absolute source. The absolute mind is the real. If your vision is like that, you see self-nature, the supreme bodhi. Please go back and think for one or two days. Write another gatha and bring it to me. If your gatha crosses the threshold, I shall give you the robe and bowl, and transmit to you the Dharma."

At this, Shenxiu bowed to the master and went out. More days passed. Shenxiu failed to come up with another *gatha*. He was in a trance and could not bring himself to concentrate on anything, as if he were in a dream. He was not happy, either when he was walking or when he was sitting.

Another two days passed.

A boy passed the mortar room, singing Shenxiu's gatha. The moment Huineng heard it, he understood that the gatha had failed to reveal self-nature. He understood its gist without anyone explaining it to him.

He said to the kid, "What gatha is it that you are reciting?"

The kid said, "You lowly creature do not know the story. The master said that the issue of life and death is the only thing that matters. He is going to hand down his robe and Dharma teaching. Therefore he told the disciples to each write a gatha. The one whose gatha shows an understanding of the great truth will receive the robe and Dharma transmission to become the Sixth Grand Master. Shenxiu the Elder wrote on the wall of the south corridor a gatha on the vanity of appearances. The master asked everyone to recite it, saying that self-cultivation according to it prevents one from falling into evil abysses and is of great benefit."

I said, "I want to recite it too in order to form a karmic connection for the salvation of my next life. Sir! I have been working on the mortar for well over eight months and have never visited the main hall. Please take me to the gatha so that I can pay my tribute." The boy took me to the gatha, and I paid tribute to it.

I said, "I am illiterate. Would you please read it to me?"

It happened that Zhang Riyong, provincial police chief of Jianzhou, was there too. He read the gatha aloud.

After hearing it, I said, "I have a gatha too. Will you do me the honor of writing it down for me?"

The officer said, "You have a gatha? It is strange."

I said to him, "One who is learning the supreme bodhi shall not slight the beginner. The lowliest person may have the highest wisdom. The highest person may have the lowest wisdom. One who slights others commits an unforgivable sin."

The officer said, "Please say your gatha and I shall write it down for you. In case you receive the Dharma transmission, don't forget to liberate me first."

My gatha read:

By origin there is no bodhi tree,
Nor is there a mirror bright.
Originally there is not a single thing,
Where does dust alight?

After this was written, the crowd marveled. All were amazed and they said to each other, "This is incredible! We cannot judge people by their appearances. He is an incarnate bodhisattva and we should not have made him work like that!"

Seeing the commotion, the Fifth Grand Master feared that harm might be brought to me and erased the gatha with a shoe.

"This too fails to reveal self-nature," he said. The crowd took it for granted.

The following day, the Fifth Grand Master stealthily came to the mortar room and saw me pounding rice with a stone tied to my waist.

He said, "A seeker of truth forgets his body. This is an example!"

He said, "How is the rice? "

I said, "The rice is well threshed. Now it needs to be sifted."

The Fifth Grand Master gave the mortar three knocks with his cane and then left. I immediately understood what he meant. At the third watch that night, I went to the master's room. He used a robe as a blind so that nobody would see us from the outside. He explained *The Diamond Sutra* to me. As he explained the sentence "One's mind should not be attached to anything," I was suddenly enlightened. All dharmas are about self-nature.

I said to the master, "I had not expected that self-nature should be clear and clean by itself. I had not expected that self-nature should be free of being and non-being. I had not expected that self-nature should be sufficient in its own right. I had not expected that self-nature should be unfaltering. I had not expected that self-nature should have produced all the ten thousand dharmas."

The master saw that I had seen the original nature and said to me, "Without recognizing the original mind, one cannot benefit from learning the Dharma. One who recognizes his own original mind and sees his own original nature is called a saint, a teacher of gods and humans, and a Buddha."

The transmission took place at the third watch of night and was not known by anyone. The Fifth Grand Master transmitted to me the teaching of sudden enlightenment and handed me the robe and alms bowl.

He said, "Now you are the sixth-generation Grand Master. You shall protect the faith, save the living, and spread the word. Make sure that it is not disrupted. Take a listen to my gatha:

As long as there is sentience,
Seeds are sown.
On the land of cause,
Fruits of effect are produced.
When sentience is absent,

Seeds are not present.

If there is no nature,

There is nothing to nurture.”

The Fifth Grand Master continued, "When Master Bodhidharma first came to this land, people doubted him. Therefore, later he handed down this robe as evidence of the belief to be transferred from generation to generation. Yet, the Dharma teachings had been transmitted on a mind-to-mind basis to be studied and comprehended by the receiver on his own.

"Since antiquity, only the essence has been transferred from Buddha to Buddha and only the original mind has been handed down from Master to Master. The robe is an object of contention and shall stop with you. Whoever receives the robe has his life at risk. You shall go right now lest someone do you harm."

I said, "Where shall I go?"

He said, "Stop at Huai and hide at Hui."⁸

Having received the robe and the alms bowl at the third watch of night, I said to the master, "I am a southerner and have no idea of the mountain roads here. How can I make it to the riverside?"

He said, "Not to worry. I will go with you."

He escorted me all the way to the Jiujiang Ferry, where he bade me get on a boat. Taking the oars into his hands, he started rowing the boat.

I said, "Master, please be seated. It should be me to work the oars."

He said, "It is me who should carry you to the other shore."

I said, "When I was lost, it was up to the teacher to carry me across. Now I am enlightened, I should carry myself across. Carrying differs from carrying despite the use of the same word. Thanks to your transmission I am now enlightened. Therefore, I should carry myself across by virtue of my own original nature."

He said, "You are right. So it is. The Dharma of the Buddha will be spread by you. I shall leave the world three years after you leave this place. Now, fare thee well. Go all the way to the south. You shall not make it known immediately. To spread the Dharma of the Buddha there is a long long road ahead."

I said goodbye to the master and went south. In two months, I got as far as Dayu Ridge.

⁸ *Huai* is part of the name of Huaiji, a county in today's Zhaoqing City, Guangdong Province. *Hui* is part of the name of Sihui, a county in today's Guangdong Province.

The Fifth Grand Master returned to the monastery. He did not go to the main hall.

A few days passed. His disciples began to be suspicious. They went to him and said, "Master, is there anything that ails you or bothers you?"

He replied, "I am very well. The robe and the Dharma went south."

Upon being asked who received them, he said, "Neng, the Able."⁹ So it was known to the disciples. Monk Huiming, whose secular name was Chen, had been a military officer of the fourth order. He was coarse and rustic. Bent on finding me he took the lead among my pursuers. On the point of his approaching me, I threw the robe and bowl onto a stone.

I said to myself, "This robe represents the faith. Can it be taken by force?"

I hid myself in a thick growth of grass. He got to the spot and tried to lift it without success.

He said, "Sir! I am after the Dharma, not the robe and bowl. Then I came out from hiding and sat on the stone with my legs folded.

He bowed to me and said, "Sir! Please educate me on the Dharma."

I said, "Now that you are after the Dharma, please hold your breath and stop all the accessory conditions. Think nothing. Then, I shall speak to you."

Huiming held his breath for quite some time.

I said, "When you stop thinking of good and evil, or vice and virtue, you are what you originally are." Huiming immediately experienced the great enlightenment.

He asked, "Besides the secret words and secret message, as said, is there any other secret message?"

I said, "Now that I told you, they are no longer secrets. If you turn back to ask yourself, you will find that the secrets are with you."

Huiming said, "Although I am in Huangmei, I have not seen my own face. Your instructions are like water to a thirsty person who understands whether it is cool or warm. Now sir, you are my teacher."

I said, "If it must be so. You and I are both disciples of Huangmei. We shall respectively take good care of the teaching."

⁹ *Neng* is part of Huineng's name. In Chinese *neng* means *able*.

Huiming asked, "Where shall I go?"

I said, "Stop at Yuan and live at Meng."

He bowed and left.

Huiming went back to the foot of the ridge and said to the rest of the pursuers, "I went as far as to the rocky mountain peak and there was no trace of him. Let's try the other direction." The others believed him.

Later, Huiming changed his name to Daoming to avoid the *hui* in the name of his teacher.

And later, I arrived in Caoxi. My evil pursuers followed. I removed to Sihui, where I sought refuge among the hunters. I was there for fifteen years. I preached the Dharma to them at any convenience. They often asked me to watch over the hunter's trap. Whenever I saw an animal caught on the net, I set it free. At mealtimes, I put some vegetables in their cooking pot. When asked, I said, "I will just eat the vegetable beside the meat."¹⁰

One day, it occurred to me that it was time that I should start preaching the Dharma and that endless hiding would be pointless. Then, I went out of hiding and went to the Faxing Monastery in Guangzhou. When I arrived, Master Yinzong was explaining *The Nirvana Sutra*.

It came to pass that the monastery flag was blowing in the wind.

One monk said, "The wind moves." Another said, "The flag moves." They argued and argued.

I stepped forward and said, "Neither the wind nor the flag moves. It's your mind that moves." At this, everyone was astonished.

Yinzong invited me to the front seat and asked me about its deep meaning.

Seeing that my answer was brief and to the point without being bound by any written texts, he said, "Sir, you are no ordinary individual. It has been rumored that the receiver of the robe and teaching of Huangmei has come to the south. Is that you?"

I said, "I do not make so bold as to say yes."

Then, he bowed and asked me to show the robe and bowl to the people present.

¹⁰ This has given rise to a Chinese expression *roubiancai* (vegetable-beside-the-meat). Now when Buddhists eat with non-Buddhists, they eat "vegetable beside the meat" after the Huineng fashion.

He said, "In his transmission what instruction did the Master of Huangmei give you?"

I said, "There was no instruction but a discussion of seeing self-nature. There was no discussion of liberation through the practice of meditation and motionlessness."¹¹

He said, "Why didn't he discuss liberation through meditation and motionlessness?"

I said, "Because it implies dualism instead of the Dharma of the Buddha, which is not dualistic."

He said, "What is the non-dualism of the Dharma of the Buddha like?"

I said, "You teach *The Nirvana Sutra* for the understanding of Buddha-nature because the Dharma of the Buddha is non-dualistic. Once Bodhisattva King Highly-Virtuous¹² asked the Buddha, 'If one breaks the Four Commandments¹³ and commits the Five Treacheries¹⁴ and is in a continuous state of craving, are one's good roots cut off and does one still have Buddha-nature?' The Buddha said, 'There are two kinds of good roots: permanent versus impermanent.' Buddha nature is neither permanent nor impermanent. Therefore it can never be cut off and is never dualistic. On the one hand there is goodness, on the other hand there is evil. Buddha-nature is neither good nor evil, and therefore it is non-dualistic. The *skandhas* and the *dhatus* are commonly seen as two categories. The wise understand they are of the same nature. The non-dualistic nature is Buddha-nature."

Hearing this, Yinzong was delighted and put his hands together to salute me.

He said, "My interpretation of the sutra is like bits and pieces of tiles and bricks, while your discussion of its meaning is comparable to real gold."

Then he shaved my hair and offered to be my student.

The next thing, under the bodhi tree, I opened the Dharma Door of Eastern Hills.

¹¹ Meditation and concentration (*chanding*): In Chinese, *chan* is a translation of the Sanskrit word *Dhyana* according to meaning while *ding* is a transliteration. However, *The Platform Sutra* sometimes speaks of the one word as two words with *ding* gathering meaning from its Chinese morphology, which suggests fixedness, stillness or motionlessness.

¹² There are special chapters (27-32) about Bodhisattva Highly-Virtuous King in *The Mahayana Mahaparinirvana Sutra*.

¹³ No adultery, no stealing, no killing, and no arrogance.

¹⁴ Abuse of one's father, abuse of one's mother, murder of arhats, damage of the body of a Buddha, and sabotage of monastic unity and monastic services.

Since I received the transmission of Dharma in the Eastern Hills, I have been going through all kinds of trying experiences and my life has been hanging by a thread.

Mr. Commissioner, Mr. Officers, dear monks and nuns! Today we are gathered here because of the karma of many kalpas¹⁵ of time. It is also the result of our common service to the Buddhas in our previous lives so that we have planted the same good roots to share the story of sudden enlightenment. There is a cause for my attaining to the Dharma. The teachings are from the early saints. They are not from my own wisdom. All those who wish to hear the teachings of the previous saints, please purify your minds first. After hearing them, you will have no more doubts and will be no different from the great masters of the past. After hearing the lecture, the audience bowed and left with joy.

¹⁵ Kalpas: (in Hindu cosmology) a period in which the universe experiences a cycle of creation and destruction

Chapter 2. Wisdom

The following day, Commissioner Wei came for more instructions. The master took his seat.

He said to the audience, "You should clear your minds and recite the *Maha-Prajna-Paramita Sutra*."

He continued:

"Good friends! The wisdom of bodhi-prajna is inherent in everyone. Failure to realize it is caused by confusion of the mind. The guidance of a mentor¹⁶ is needed in order to see self-nature. It should be known that the ignorant and the wise are not different in Buddha-nature. There are the ignorant and the wise because some people are confused and others are not. Today, I am going to explain the dharma of *maha-prajna-paramita* so that each of you will get your own wisdom. Please concentrate your mind and listen to what I have to say.

"Good friends! There are those who speak of prajna all day every day but do not have prajna of their own nature; but this is like a discussion of food, it won't fill the stomach. Talking about emptiness without ever seeing self-nature is no good.

"Good friends! *Maha-prajna-paramita* is a Sanskrit word meaning 'great wisdom arriving at the other shore'. It is to be practiced by the mind, not spoken by the mouth. Merely spoken by the mouth without being practiced by the mind it is like an illusion, a dewdrop or a thunderbolt. When it is spoken by the mouth and practiced by the mind, the mind and the mouth agree. Original nature is the Buddha. There is no other Buddha than that nature. What is *maha*? *Maha* means 'big.' The mind is as vast as empty space and has no limits. It is neither square nor round, neither big nor small, neither green nor yellow nor red nor white, neither above nor below, neither long nor short, neither sad nor happy, neither right nor wrong, neither good nor evil, and it has neither head nor tail. The realms of all the Buddhas are like the empty space. The unfathomable nature of human beings is originally a void in which no single dharma is attainable. Self-nature is a real void like that.

"Good friends! Please don't be attached to emptiness because I speak of emptiness. First of all, do not be attached to emptiness. If you empty your mind and sit quietly, you are attached to the emptiness of no appearance.

¹⁶ *dashanzhizhi*: a great good friend

"Good friends! The world is an empty void that contains the physical forms of all myriad things. The sun, the moon and the stars, mountains, rivers and lands, fountains, springs and brooks, grasses, groves and forests, evil people and good ones, good dharmas and evil dharmas, heaven and hell, all the oceans and seas, and all the Sumerus¹⁷ are in the void. The nature void of human beings is like that.

"Good friends! Self-nature contains the ten thousand dharmas. Therefore, it is big and vast. The ten thousand dharmas are in the nature of human beings. Seeing all human evils and goodnesses without making choices between them, and without being tainted by them, the mind is like the empty space.

"Good friends! That is called greatness and that is called *maha*.

"Good friends! The confused just talk. The wise cultivate it in the mind. There are other confused ones who empty their minds and sit quietly, thinking nothing. They think themselves big. Never speak to such people, for their mind has gone astray.

"Good friends! The greatness of the mind permeates all the Dharma realms. When it is used, everything becomes clear, and once it is applied all things are known. All things are one. One is all things. Free to go and free to come, the mind and the body meet no obstacle. That is *prajna*.

"Good friends! All *prajna* wisdom originates in one's original nature and none comes from without. Don't be mistaken and consider it to be self-appropriation of the true nature.

"When one is real, all are real. The mind that is for big things does not travel on small paths. Don't talk about emptiness all day and every day without cultivating it in the mind, the way an average person anoints himself King only to be disappointed. And such people are not my disciples.

"Good friends! What is *prajna*? It is 'wisdom' in our language.

"In all places, and in all time, not to be confused in any flash of thought and to always live in wisdom is *prajna* in action. To be confused in a flash of thought destroys *prajna*, and to be wise in a flash of thought produces *prajna*.

"The confused and deluded people of the world do not see *prajna*. *Prajna* in the mouth, they are confused in the mind. They often say that they are cultivating *prajna*. They are constantly talking about emptiness but

¹⁷ *Sumeru* (Sanskrit) is the name of the central world-mountain in Buddhist cosmology.

they don't recognize real emptiness. There is neither shape nor form to prajna. It is the wisdom mind. Understanding like this is called prajna wisdom.