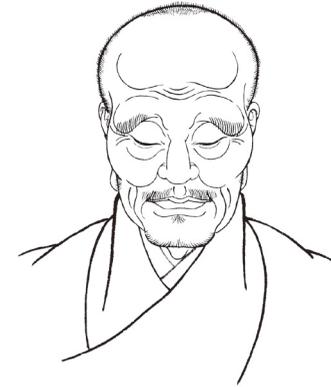


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CHAN MAGAZINE

SPRING 2020





*Master Huineng – The Sixth Patriarch of Chan*  
Portrait by Chien-Chih Liu

The Chan school has a saying, “No reliance on words and scriptures.” In other words, Chan does not recommend relying solely on the Dharma of teachings. But the curious fact is that the Chan patriarchs and masters left behind more teachings than any other school of Buddhism. For thirty years, I have been all over the world saying that the mind Dharma cannot be spoken. And yet the purpose of all of this writing and teaching is to teach people not to rely on words.



CHAN MASTER SHENG YEN  
Seven-day retreat in Moscow, May 2003

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# The Mind Dharma of the Sixth Patriarch

BY  
CHAN MASTER SHENG YEN

In May of 2003, Master Sheng Yen presented a seven-day Chan retreat in Moscow at the invitation of the Wujimen Martial Arts Group. For his morning, afternoon, and evening talks, Master Sheng Yen chose as one of his main themes the teachings of Sixth Patriarch Huineng on the practice of “no-form” as expressed in the *Platform Sutra*. (Master Sheng Yen’s talks during the retreat were concurrently translated into English by Dr. Douglas Gildow.) The full text of Master Sheng Yen’s talks on that retreat was published serially in *Chan Magazine* beginning with the Autumn 2004 issue. For this special issue dedicated to the teachings of Huineng, we have compiled excerpts from the talks, wherein Master Sheng Yen talks about Huineng’s teaching on the practice of “formlessness.” The excerpts were compiled and edited for brevity by Ernest Heau. (There being much to absorb here, we recommend to readers to treat this text as a resource to return to often.)



## Mastery of the Teachings, Mastery of Mind

IT HAS ALREADY BEEN ONE DAY and I believe that most of us have not brought peace to our mind. We are having conflicts with wandering thoughts and with our body. Originally wanting to be liberated from the self, we find that the self is still quite important to us. We start by seeking the joy of liberation but the first thing we encounter is sorrow and suffering. This proves that we are ensnared by the body and the mind and not actually in control of ourselves. According to the belief in Shakyamuni Buddha's time, to be fully liberated meant becoming an arhat by transcending the birth-and-death cycle of samsara, and entering nirvana. Typically this could only be done if one was a monk or nun. But to Huineng, anyone who practiced in accordance with the principle of no-form could be liberated. Liberation meant that one no longer has vexations and is no longer influenced by the environment, but one also remains in the world to help others. This is the way of the bodhisattva – liberation does not require ordination nor does one need to leave this world.

Let us look at the idea of form in relation to time as well as space. In the temporal aspect, every thought that we have is a form that relates to the past, present, or future. On retreat, we practice dropping thoughts of past and future and just keeping our mind in the present, with the ultimate goal of dropping even thoughts in the present mind.

In the spatial aspect, forms relate to oneself and to others. In other words, all sentient beings are forms. We should understand that anything we perceive is constantly changing, impermanent and without inherent self-nature. Self, others, and sentient beings are all objects of perception and likewise impermanent.



Chan Master Sheng Yen DDM Archive Photo

So the temporal aspect of form relates to thoughts of past, present, and future, and the spatial aspect relates to self and other sentient beings. Nevertheless, the forms in time and space are completely interlinked and it is impossible to draw a firm line between the two. But all forms in time and space are impermanent, which means that they are empty of self-nature and ultimately formless.

The words from the *Diamond Sutra*, “abiding nowhere, give rise to mind,” means that one must realize – not just know intellectually – that forms in time are

transient and ultimately lack self-nature. Likewise, spatial forms are also in flux, impermanent, and lack self-nature. For these reasons, one does not abide in forms of time or space, and does not cling to them.

“Give rise to mind,” refers to the spontaneous arising of wisdom when we do not cling to forms. But wisdom itself is a form, so one does not abide in it either, and one does not attach to it. Instead, one goes beyond wisdom to realize no-mind. This no-mind is the no-form, or formlessness, that Huineng speaks of in the *Platform Sutra*.

Let's now look at the first line of Huineng's verse: *Mastery of the teachings and mastery of mind are like the sun in the empty sky*. However, to have mastery of either the teachings or the mind, you must actually experience the mind Dharma. If you can directly master the mind Dharma, there is no need to study the Dharma of the teachings. Otherwise, one should begin with the Dharma of teachings to ultimately realize the mind Dharma. At that time you will see that the Dharma of the teachings and the mind Dharma are one and the same. In other words, we use the language and concepts of the teachings to reach what is ultimately beyond language and concepts.

So far, have I been talking about Dharma of the teachings, or about the mind Dharma, or both? Well, the answer is that so long as we use language and concepts, we can only talk about the Dharma of the teachings. The Chan school has a saying, “No reliance on words and scriptures.” In other words, Chan does not recommend relying solely on the Dharma of teachings. But the curious fact is that the Chan patriarchs and masters left behind more teachings than any other school of Buddhism. For thirty years, I have been all over the world saying that the mind Dharma cannot be spoken. And yet the purpose of all of this writing and teaching is to teach people not to rely on words.

## Realizing No-Form

When we speak of the mind not abiding anywhere, it does not mean that your mind has no thoughts whatsoever. It does not mean that when you see someone you should not act like you did not see them, or if you hear something there is no sound, or if you're eating you don't taste anything. No, non-abiding means that you're clearly aware of phenomena but are not entangled in them; you are not caught up in craving, hatred, likes and dislikes, doubt, arrogance or jealousy, and so on. If these states of mind arise then immediately return to your method to remove such vexations. This way, even if you cannot fully realize non-abiding you can at least practice it.

Our emphasis on this retreat is not particularly on sitting but on practicing Chan in daily life. Of course the longer you can sit the better; but do not force yourself. Is it true then, that we don't actually need sitting meditation? Would we be just as well if we lay down on a sofa or on a floor practicing this way? In principle that is true. In fact, sick people confined to bed can practice. But most people will quickly enter into a stupor and perhaps fall asleep. Or if they don't fall asleep, they'll have all kinds of scattered thoughts. Instead, if we sit or move we can be aware of the sitting or the movements. So, it's best if during our practice we can feel the body. The body is a tool to help us train the mind. Without the body it's very difficult to train the mind.

In Chan, daily life itself is practice and the early masters did not encourage practitioners to do much sitting meditation. Huineng himself did not do sitting meditation and neither did some of his famous disciples, such as Huairang and Qingyuan. This is not to say that we do not use our body at all. We use the body as a tool for practice, but sitting meditation is not the whole of practice. If sitting meditation simply

turns into an exercise in training our legs, then it is useless. But if we use the body as a tool for training our mind it can be very useful.

Those who don't sit at all and those who are overly attached to sitting are both incorrect. When we have the proper attitude sitting is a relatively easy way to stabilize our confused minds. Therefore, sitting is still important. If, however, during regular daily life you can maintain a calm and stable mind, then, when sufficient causes and conditions mature, one can attain enlightenment that way. However, a precondition for this path to enlightenment is to have a clear understanding of emptiness, no-self, and no-mind. Without this understanding, even with a calm and stable mind, one cannot become enlightened.

To realize no-mind and no-form, one must have a clear and continual awareness of mind and forms. Before one can do that, one must start with a stable mind. With a busy and confused mind, one does not know what mind itself is, and one does not know what the so-called forms of time and forms of space are. Merely conceptual knowledge of emptiness, no-self, and no-mind is of limited use. It is only knowledge, not real experience.

Daily life is practice. However, because most people's minds are confused, there is a need for places like Chan halls for meditating. Most people are unable in their daily life to stabilize and calm their mind or perceive the true emptiness of forms. While there is no doubt that sudden

enlightenment is attainable, most people need to use the gradual approach. However, even in gradual practice, there is a precondition to train the mind so that it can be known and be put down.

### Like the Sun in an Empty Sky

In the first line from our text, *"mastery of the teachings"* refers to the language and concepts of the Dharma, and *"mastery of the mind"* refers to the mind Dharma, or enlightenment. Mastery of the teachings and mastery of mind are ultimately one and the same, and for one who has attained this state, the mind is like *"the sun in an empty sky."* The sun represents buddha-nature or emptiness, and just as nothing can obstruct emptiness, in an empty sky nothing obstructs the brilliance of the sun. There is not actually a thing called buddha-nature. However, in realizing emptiness one uses the functions of wisdom and compassion to shine the light of



Photo by Julien Di Maio

Dharma on all sentient beings. Just as the sun illuminates everything, the functions of wisdom and compassion can also influence all beings. Huineng's sun is thus an analogy of the functions of wisdom and compassion.

Since there is no obstruction to emptiness, we speak of the empty sky whose lack of obstructions can be called "silence." The arising of this sun-like wisdom and compassion through realizing emptiness is called "illumination." We can say therefore, that this line describes realization in silent illumination. On one hand the sky is unobstructed – this is silence; on other hand the sun is shining on all beings – this is illumination. When illumination is developed to its highest point, silence will necessarily be present. The reverse is also true: when silence is at its deepest level, illumination will also be present.

### Let Go of All Forms, Let Affairs Come to Rest

To practice well, we must learn to relax. When we cannot relax our body, we also find it difficult to relax our mind. If we have expectations, then we're seeking something. If we have fear, we're rejecting something or we lack security. This results in nervousness and tension. Being unsatisfied and having cravings means we have a seeking mind, and that will make us nervous. We can see therefore that relaxation is not just concerned with the muscles; it also involves our thoughts, concepts, and emotions. We have to put them all down to fully relax. When we can do that all the time, we will have no more vexations and we will be on the path of liberation.

After learning how to relax, you should apply two rules in your practice. The first is: "Let go of all forms." Forms can be understood generally as phenomena or objects of perception. So, letting go

of all forms means realizing formlessness. So, please let go of all forms. The second rule is: "Let all affairs come to rest." This means putting down all mental and bodily concerns.

If you can do this completely you will realize no-mind. At this point, in a way of speaking, you have nothing to do; there is nothing good or bad, important or unimportant, to do for yourself or others. At this time you are truly relaxed and you have been able to put down everything. Please keep reminding yourself to apply these two rules.

"Let go of all forms; let all affairs come to rest."

When you are vexed, when you feel pain, fear, or any kind of unease, you can repeat these rules like a mantra and remind yourself of their meaning. If you do that your attitude and mental situation will change. So, to realize the formless Dharma, the first step is to let go of forms. One-by-one, let go of forms, beginning with wandering thoughts, especially thoughts of past and future. Put down thinking about past and future and stay only in the present. If you are doing sitting meditation, your mind should be only on sitting. The same applies to working, walking, eating, drinking, exercising, chanting, or doing prostrations. Experience these activities fully, the sensations that come with them, and be aware of your mental reactions in the process. If you can let go of the past and the future and put your mind totally in the present, you have at least relinquished the forms of time.

### Emptiness of the Dharma of Mind

When he was still at Huangmei, the monastery of Fifth Patriarch Hongren, Huineng worked in the kitchen milling rice. As a method for finding his Dharma heir, Hongren, who was the abbot, asked the monks to write a verse expressing

their own understanding of Dharma. None of the monks were willing to do this except the head monk, Shenxiu, who, when the other monks were asleep, wrote a verse on the wall in the Chan hall. It went like this:

*The body is a bodhi tree,  
The mind is a bright mirror.  
Always diligently polish the mirror,  
And do not let dust collect.*

“*The body is a bodhi tree*” means that we use the body as the foundation through which we cultivate enlightenment. The second line, “*The mind is a bright mirror*,” means that the mind is like a mirror that reflects what is in front of it without adding any self-centered view. If you can imagine it, the mind is like a circular mirror that can reflect everything around it, in 360 degrees. The meaning of the third line, “*Always diligently polish the mirror*” is that we should be diligent in using Dharma methods to dissipate or eliminate vexations and wandering thoughts. The fourth line, “*And do not let dust collect*” says that one should work hard to train the mind so that it does not permit vexations to stain our clear, mirror-like mind.

So, please everyone, take a guess. Does this poem express a realization of formlessness? Does it demonstrate a true understanding of the Dharma of mind? Yes or no?

Audience: “No.”

But does this poem express something good? Yes, of course it does. Practitioners need to behave like this. In any case, according to the *Platform Sutra*, at this time Huineng had already realized the Dharma of mind when he heard someone quote from the *Diamond Sutra*. Being illiterate, Huineng asked one of the monks to read him Shenxiu’s verse on the wall. That night, after hearing Shenxiu’s verse, Huineng

asked one of the monks to write the following lines on the wall, next to Shenxiu’s verse:

*Bodhi is originally without a tree,  
The mirror is also without a stand.  
Originally there is not a single thing.  
Where is there a place for dust to collect?*

“*Originally there is not a single thing*,” means that there are no real substantial forms, called “bodhi,” “buddha-nature,” or “emptiness.” Huineng is saying that bodhi is not a substantial thing. People often think that enlightenment is an experience in which we can feel a certain thing, or discover exactly what this “thing,” enlightenment, is. This is an incorrect view because enlightenment, or seeing self-nature, is an experience of emptiness. It is the experience of phenomena as being empty and insubstantial. Most Eastern and Western philosophies and religions believe in a highest or ultimate reality to which they give names such as oneness or God. Actually, we enter this oneness when we experience unified mind in meditation. In the West it may be called oneness, but according to the Chan Dharma, we need to put down or let go this unified mind. We do not want to think of this unified mind as the highest or ultimate truth. But how do we get to what is highest truth? We have to drop everything, and then we will come to the point of formlessness or non-attachment to all forms. Forms are products of causes and conditions. As such they are changing and non-substantial. They still exist; it is just that the enlightened mind does not abide in them.

This idea of formlessness is different from theories that postulate an original substance or an original cause. In contrast, Buddhadharmas advocates the idea that everything arises because of causes and conditions, and is therefore empty, or formless. Now, let’s

compare the emptiness of the Dharma of the teachings with the emptiness that is actualized in the Dharma of mind. The emptiness of the Dharma of teachings is arrived at through logical deduction or analysis, and in both cases we are using the mind to reach understanding.

On the other hand to have an actual realization of emptiness we use methods such as silent illumination or *huatou*, and when our mind reaches a unified state we want to put down this unified mind. However, we cannot just put down the unified mind at will; we need to repeatedly use our methods, again and again. When conditions in our practice mature and we encounter some kind of acute stimulus – certain sounds, words, or sights – all doubts and questions may suddenly disappear. Or perhaps we are suddenly able to put down our already stabilized mind, and all thoughts instantly disintegrate and shatter. It is as if we have just broken through a silk cocoon in which we have been confined. Not only has the cocoon disappeared but the silkworm has also disappeared. We are free of all burdens. Everything still exists but there is no self; that is to say, there is no clinging nor vexations associated with our “self.” This emptiness is reached through spiritual practice, and is different from the emptiness reached through analysis or logic.

When seeing self-nature, one realizes that all phenomena are insubstantial and that the self has always been non-existent. At this time one is able to put down all attachments. However, sooner or later, depending on the person and the depth of the experience, one’s self-centeredness and attachments will return. Therefore, it is extremely important for the individual to continue using methods of practice.

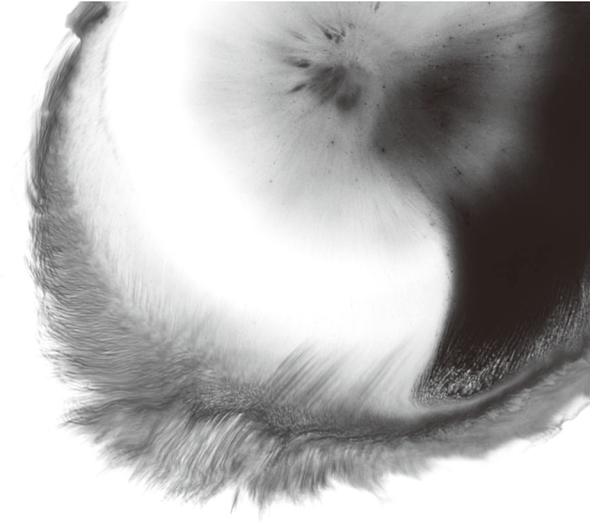


Photo by Ilya Lix

For example, if one is in the stage of watching the *huatou*, and if one continues to practice at this level, it is possible to have similar experiences, and one’s realization will become deeper and deeper. Not all people however, are able to repeat the experience like this. Regardless of whether one can repeat it or not, the experience of seeing self-nature is extremely valuable. Although one still has self-centeredness, many vexations will have been eliminated. Having experienced putting down one’s mind, one will also develop a high degree of self-confidence and never again lose one’s spiritual practice. This experience is like suddenly seeing light for the first time. Although the light will fade or disappear, the individual will still know what that light is, because he or she has actually seen it. Something like this happens when someone experiences seeing self-nature or emptiness. A shallow experience of enlightenment can be called seeing self-nature, while a deeper experience of enlightenment can be called liberation. 🌿



# Verse on No-Form

From the Platform Sutra of the Sixth Patriarch

by Chan Master Huineng

Chan Magazine is pleased to offer this new English rendition of Chan Master Huineng's "Verse on No-Form," based on the Zongbao version of the *Dharma-Jewel Platform Sutra of the Sixth Patriarch*, by contributing editor Ernest Heau and Wee Keat Ng.

In 2016, while reading English translations of the "Verse on No-Form," (from Chapter 2 of the *Platform Sutra*) Ernest Heau felt that some of them aspired more towards literal accuracy than towards "poetic" considerations such as rhythm, cadence, symmetry between lines, recitability, ease of memorization, and so on. And yet, according to the sutra, Huineng explicitly exhorted his followers to recite and memorize the "Verse on No-Form."

Ernest thought that coming up with a more "verse-like" English version would be a worthwhile effort. Not being literate in Chinese, his best recourse was to consult seven different English translations, three commentaries on the verse by Chinese masters (including Master Sheng Yen), Chinese Buddhist dictionaries, and several translation websites, to create his own version. The focus of his effort was strictly on the sixty lines of five characters each that comprise the "Verse on No-Form," from Chapter 2 on Prajna.

In 2019, Ernest decided that to ensure that his rendition was faithful to the original text, a thorough review of every stanza, line, and word was needed. His good fortune was to convince Mr. Wee Keat Ng, an experienced translator of Buddhist texts, to collaborate on such a task. Working together by email over several months, Ernest and Wee Keat arrived at a new version which underwent many changes and revisions in achieving what they believe to be an authentic new English rendition of Huineng's "Verse on No-Form." Ernest and Wee Keat extend their thanks to Ming Yee Wang and David Listen for their kindness in reviewing drafts and offering suggestions which improved the final version.

## Master Huineng's Request to his Disciples

"Good and learned friends! I have a verse on no-form which you should all recite. Whether householder or monastic, you should practice in accord with it. If you don't practice it, just memorizing my words would be of no benefit."

- From the Chapter on Prajna in the Platform Sutra

1.

說通及心通，如日處虛空。唯傳見性法，出世破邪宗。

Mastery of the teachings and mastery of mind  
Are like the sun in an empty sky;  
Speaking the Dharma of seeing one's nature,  
Emerging in the world to shatter false doctrines.

2.

法即無頓漸，迷悟有遲疾。只此見性門，愚人不可悉。

The Dharma is neither sudden nor gradual,  
Awaking from confusion can be slow or fast.  
This gateway into seeing one's nature  
Cannot be known by those lacking wisdom.

3.

說即雖萬般，合理還歸一。煩惱暗宅中，常須生慧日。

The myriad ways to expound this teaching  
All return to one true principle.  
Within the dark abode of affliction,  
Always give rise to the sun of wisdom.

4.

邪來煩惱至，正來煩惱除。邪正俱不用，清淨至無餘。

*With wrong views come afflictions,  
With right views afflictions are cleansed.  
When right and wrong are put to rest,  
Spotless purity is then attained.*

5.

菩提本自性，起心即是妄。淨心在妄中，但正無三障。

*Bodhi being your original nature,  
Giving rise to thoughts is illusory.  
Within the illusory is purity of mind,  
Free from obstructions when set aright.*

6.

世人若修道，一切盡不妨。常自見己過，與道即相當。

*When worldly people cultivate the Way,  
There is nothing at all to hinder them.  
Always aware of their own missteps,  
They are thus in accord with the Way.*

7.

色類自有道，各不相妨惱。離道別覓道，終身不見道。

*All forms of nature have their own path  
Of not hindering or afflicting others.  
Leaving such a path to seek another,  
Till life's end the Way remains unseen.*

8.

波波度一生，到頭還自懊。欲得見真道，行正即是道。

*A lifetime of searching high and low,  
At the end there is remorse and regret.  
For one who seeks a path to the Truth,  
Right conduct is directly the Way.*

9.

自若無道心，暗行不見道。若真修道人，不見世間過。

*Without a mind that aspires to the Way,  
You wander in darkness, blind to the path.  
As one who truly practices the Way,  
Look beyond the errors of the world.*

10.

若見他人非，自非卻是左。他非我不非，我非自有過。

*When we find fault with others,  
The error is but our own.  
Blaming others but not ourselves  
Is itself a transgression.*

11.

但自卻非心，打除煩惱破。憎愛不關心，長伸兩腳臥。

*Cast aside the mind of finding fault,  
Sever your worries and afflictions.  
Free from thoughts of hatred and love,  
Stretch out your legs in repose.*

12.

欲擬化他人，自須有方便。勿令彼有疑，即是自性現。

*If you aspire to guide others,  
You must acquire skillful means.  
Refrain from causing doubt in others,  
Allow self-nature to manifest.*

13.

佛法在世間，不離世間覺。離世覓菩提，恰如求兔角。

*The Buddha's Dharma exists in the world,  
Wakefulness is within the mundane.  
To seek bodhi beyond this world,  
Is like looking for horns on a rabbit.*

14.

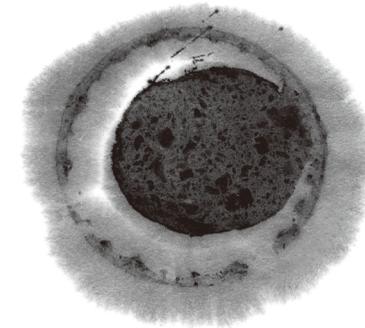
正見名出世，邪見名世間。邪正盡打卻，菩提性宛然。

*With right views you transcend the world,  
With wrong views you remain in the world.  
When all such views are left behind,  
The nature of bodhi is precisely this.*

15.

此頌是頓教，亦名大法船。迷聞經累劫，悟則剎那間。

*This verse is a teaching of the Sudden Way,  
Known as the Great Vessel of the Dharma.  
After eons of listening in confusion,  
Awakening comes in the space of a moment.*



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- *The Mind Dharma of the Sixth Patriarch* by Master Sheng Yen, translated by Douglas Gildow (Dharma Drum Publishing, 2006)

# The Message of the Platform Sutra

BY  
GUO GU

Beginning on April 14, 2017 Guo Gu (aka Prof. Jimmy Yu of Florida State University) gave six weekly talks on the *Platform Sutra* at the Tallahassee Chan Center, of which he is founder and resident teacher. This article consists of passages from the first three of those talks, as excerpted and edited by Victor Lapuszynski and Buffe Maggie Laffey. The quoted passages are about teachings on no-thought, no-form, and non-abiding and are taken from *The Platform Sutra of the Sixth Patriarch* (Numata Center for Buddhist Translation and Research, 2006), translated by John McRae from the 1291 edition of Master Zongbao (Taishō Volume 48, Number 2008).



TCC Archive Photo

I CAN'T EMPHASIZE ENOUGH how important the *Platform Sutra* is within the Chan and Zen traditions. Without understanding the key principles of Huineng's scripture, one would not be truly practicing Chan. The *Platform Sutra* condenses the Chan positions on the nature of mind, the nature of practice, our relationship with objects and people, and the nature of texts – everything is condensed in a very terse, direct way.

The most important message of this scripture, and indeed of the whole Chan tradition which makes it distinct from other forms of Buddhist practice, is the teaching on no-thought (*wu nian*), no-form (*wu xiang*), and non-abiding (*wu zhu*). These three principles refer to how we relate to the world of external and internal appearances, and to our true nature. They are the principles one embraces before realizing awakening, which is to say, before seeing one's true nature. One is always stumbling over these three principles, resisting them, following one's own instinctual, self-referential, habitual vexations. These principles are therefore something with which we must again and again realign ourselves.

These three principles also serve as guides to post-awakening practice. Most people's awakening experiences, in the larger Buddhist tradition, refer to the experience of no-self, selflessness, and freedom from self-referentiality where there is no greed, craving, aversion or anger, and no ignorance. This, very specifically, is the state of nirvana, or awakening to liberation. A passage from Chapter Four talks about the three concepts:

Good friends, since the past this teaching of ours has first taken nonthought as its central doctrine, the formless as its essence, and nonabiding as its fundamental. The formless is to transcend characteristics within the context

of characteristics. Nonthought is to be without thought in the context of thoughts. Nonabiding is to consider in one's fundamental nature that all worldly [things] are empty, with no consideration of retaliation - whether good or evil, pleasant or ugly, and enemy or friend, etc., during times of words, fights, and disputation.

## No-Thought

No-thought does not mean cutting off thinking. How does one practice no-thought amidst the free flow of thoughts? Here, the expression "thoughts" has two levels of meaning. The first means our mental processes, our brain's natural ability to think, symbolize, conceptualize, perceive. The second refers to fixations of constructs, our tendency to reify thoughts or ideas into discrete realities as things. The practice of no-thought amidst thought means to not reify, solidify, congeal, or trust our own concepts of things as reality, without blocking the natural flow of thinking.

We generally believe that the way we think about ourselves is how we actually are. We cannot distinguish between our thoughts and the reality of who we are. If we're feeling negative, we don't see anything good about ourselves. When we're in a good mood, even a shortcoming is adorable. This projection happens so quickly that we don't usually recognize it. But this subtle feeling is what the passage above calls "thought." So when you feel something within, you should recognize it but don't reify, identify, and solidify it into thing. Definitely don't build a whole narrative around it. This is the meaning of practicing "no-thought" amid thoughts. It's learning to have a healthier relationship with our thoughts, instead of being conditioned by them.

Of course, people who have had awakening experiences still have thoughts. Yet their thoughts are

self-liberating. The way they relate to the world and to their own perception and cognitive processes has been transformed. They would not do such foolish things as following their own discursive thinking, or reifying their views and opinions as if that reflects reality.

## The Formless

Regarding no-form, the *Platform Sutra* says, “The formless is to transcend characteristics within the context of characteristics.” It is to be formless amidst forms. The Chinese word for “form” is *xiang*, which has an array of implications and meanings, sometimes translated as “form,” sometimes understood as “appearances,” “characteristics,” or “objective realities.” When are we free from objective reality, appearances, forms, and characteristics? Never. You look at me now, this is a characteristic, an appearance. I look at you and all the multitude of colors, shapes, and features, all that is included in form. Amidst forms, there is the formless. What does that mean?

Good friends, to transcend all the characteristics externally, is called the formless. To be able to transcend characteristics is for the essence of the dharmas to be pure. [GG: for all things to be free.]

To transcend all the characteristics externally is called the formless. Being able to do that is to allow the essence of all things to be pure. In other words, if we don't do that, we're defiling everything we perceive or touch.

The essence of all phenomenal reality is originally pure if we don't defile it. We defile it by being engrossed in appearances, reifying them as actual things “out there.” No-thought puts a spotlight on our

interior processes. The formless turns the spotlight to the external world. They're the same thing. Two sides of the same coin. We can reify our own ideas; we can definitely reify forms.

Purity is without shape and characteristics; you only create the characteristics of purity and say this is “effort” [in meditation]. To have such a view is to obscure one's own fundamental nature, and only to be fettered by purity.

When people have a fixed idea of what purity is, they are already obstructing themselves. This notion of *wu xiang* (no-form) is so important in Chan. *Wu nian*, (no-thought) deals with how we practice, how we engage our mind. *Wu xiang* is how we engage with the world. And how do we engage with the world? All things are free from fixed characteristics, features, appearances. Some people think that meditation takes a particular characteristic, form, or posture. That's not the way Chan defines meditation (meditation here referring to *chan*). How does Chan define *chan*?

Good friends, what is it that is called meditative concentration (*chan ding*: *samadhi*)? Externally, to transcend characteristics is “meditation” (*chan*). Internally, to be undisturbed is “concentration” (*ding*).

This is a very different definition from traditional Buddhist teachings where meditation takes a particular posture, a particular form. It is for this cardinal principle that from the perspective of Chan, Chan does not rely on sitting. That's why you read about the Chan masters cutting firewood and carrying water as *chan*. Why? Chan practice is formless, with no fixed form.

That's why from the Chan school's perspective there is no need for us to disengage with the world. No need to move out into the wilderness, no need to be a hermit. Where is *chan* then? In the midst of form. How? Don't be disturbed. When you're disturbed, you're attached. There is subject and there is object. When you are disturbed, you have fixed notions. Think about that. When we are disturbed, fixed notions are present.

## Non-Abiding

Non-abiding is relating to ourselves and others in an open and receptive way, where we recognize that each moment is alive, vibrant, filled with infinite possibilities. This possibility is emptiness – the workings of buddha-nature, the expression of awakening.

Non-abiding is to consider in one's fundamental nature that all worldly [things] are empty, with no consideration of retaliation [GG: opposition] – whether good or evil, pleasant or ugly, enemy or friends, etc. during times of words, fights, and disputes.

“Fundamental” refers to our fundamental nature, our true nature. It is from our true nature that we give rise to thoughts, which is the natural expression or function of our mind. That in itself is not the problem. When we rigidly grasp onto our own thoughts, namely, opinions, notions, narratives about form, about the external world, even externalizing ourselves as an object to critique, then vexations come. But non-abiding moment to moment, freedom is our true nature. That's why it's the foundation.

What is this foundation? It is non-opposition. What do we often do when we encounter challenges, when things don't go our way? Words, fights and

disputes. What do we do? We oppose them. We get caught up by them and that's ignorance. In relation to our practice, I teach my students: no-thought (don't grasp one's own notions), no-form (don't fixate on things that are external, such as words that people say) and non-abiding (abiding in our true nature, freedom).

Someone asked whether non-abiding is something like “going with the flow.” Not really. When we go with the flow, we can end up being wishy-washy without any principles. A person without principle may not really be a practitioner, may have no opinion of their own. Practitioners have opinions, we just don't attach to our own opinion. My teacher Master Sheng Yen used to say, “Have opinions. Raise questions. It doesn't mean that I'm going to take your



Image by J.R. Korpa

suggestions.” In that engagement with students, new ideas may come out, neither the student’s nor the teacher’s. Ideas arise from the process of engaging and relating with others. So, have opinions, but understand that everyone has their own opinions and suggestions. Everyone. Everyone is trying but everyone is at a different place in their life. So the suggestions that they give are different. Our practice is not going with the flow; our practice is not to gold-plate a thousand-year-old toilet. Our practice is to open the lid, to let the stench out and scrub without attachment. Scrub with the practice of “it’s all good.”

## Wisdom

Non-abiding is our foundation. In the *Platform Sutra*, the word “foundation” refers to *ben xing* – fundamental nature, or true nature. What is this true nature? It is prajna, wisdom.

The ratiocination [GG: capacity] of the mind is vast, like space, which is boundless. [Space] is also without square and round, large and small. It is also neither blue, yellow, red, nor white. It is also without above and below, long and short. It is also without anger and without joy, without affirmation and without negation, without good and without evil, without beginning and end. The fields of the Buddha are all identical to space. The wondrous natures of people of this world are empty, without a single dharma that can be perceived. The emptiness of the self-natures is also like this.

I would add, “Without a single reified dharma [object] that can be perceived.”

This *ben xing* is the foundational principle that refers to self-nature. Self-nature refers to the featureless,



originally free from reified form. Like a room that is not tainted or defined by its furniture. It’s originally without furniture. You can put however many pieces of furniture in this room, it’s still free. It is precisely because of the freedom that the spaciousness of this room can allow us to move furniture around. That is our true nature.

Good friends, all prajna wisdom is generated from the self-natures. It does not enter us from outside. To not err in its functioning is called the spontaneous functioning of the true nature.

What is this spontaneous functioning? They are our thoughts, our creativity, our mental process.

Photo by Charles Deluvio

That’s the spontaneous functioning of this true nature. If it is non-abiding, then it is the workings of wisdom, prajna. If it grasps things, reifies things, attaches to things, then it is caught up, as described:

When the mind does not reside in the dharmas, [GG: when the mind is not caught up by things] one’s enlightenment flows freely. For the mind to reside in the dharmas is called “fettering oneself.”

## Suchness

Good friends, thoughts are activated from the self-nature of suchness.

Thoughts are the natural expression of true suchness of our true nature. For people to stop thoughts – to literally try to have “no-thought,” is deluded practice. Just another form of grasping.

The most important thing is not to become attached to emptiness. If you empty your minds and sit in quietude, this is to become attached to the emptiness of blankness.

That’s not the meaning of no-thought, not the expression of prajna, of wisdom. That’s just another form of attachment. Most people attach to material things; if after you learn the stillness of meditation, you try to escape from the troubles of life by attaching to emptiness, it’s still attachment. You haven’t gotten rid of anything.

Good friends, the ratiocination of the mind is vast and great, permeating the dharmadhātu (i.e., the cosmos). Functioning, it comprehensively and distinctly responds [to things].

You see? The mind is active.

Functioning, it knows everything. Everything is the one [mind], the one [mind] is everything. [With mind and dharmas] going and coming of themselves, the essence of the mind is without stagnation. This is prajna.

Wisdom is the free flow of the mind when it accords with our true nature. This is the fundamental and non-abiding freedom. Formlessness and no-thought approach this from the spatial perspective – things, objects. No reifying of things. Whereas, non-abiding approaches this cardinal Chan principle from a temporal perspective. Non-abiding; it’s just a fancy way of saying impermanence. Our true, wonderful nature. Not impermanent because somehow it’s stagnant, nihilistic. No, impermanent because it wonderfully engages with the world. It responds to things yet without abiding. That’s why it’s wisdom.

To be enlightened [GG: awakened] to this Dharma is to be without [GG: reified] thought. To be without recollection [GG: without dwelling on the past], without attachment, to not activate the false and deceptive – this is to allow one’s self[-suchness]-nature to function. To use wisdom to contemplate all the dharmas [GG: all the circumstances of our lives] without grasping or rejecting is [GG: It doesn’t say “leads to,” it says “is.”] to see the nature [...].

Is that the key? To put it succinctly, do not dwell on ruminations. If you do that, you’re wallowing in your own world that you have constructed with your narratives. Be without that rumination, without attachments, to not activate the false and deceptive.

## Don't Grasp, Don't Reject; Engage

We spoke about not contaminating, not staining the various circumstances and people in our lives. That means not to project our own notions onto them. To not do that is to allow one's self nature to function freely while engaged with them. That is the practice of compassion. To allow people and things to be as they are. Should we correct them if they are wrong, if they are causing harm? Yes, but only if you don't see faults and your mind has no thoughts about right or wrong. Otherwise, keep quiet! It's hard to do, but that's what must be done. That's why it says:

To use wisdom to contemplate all the dharmas, without grasping or rejecting [GG: right or wrong] is to see the nature [GG: your true nature] and accomplish Buddhahood.

Don't grasp, don't reject; engage with the world. Help people from each person's perspective, without holding onto your opinion of right or wrong. Don't inject yourself into your life circumstances, yet engage with those circumstances. Don't use your own criteria like a ruler to keep measuring everyone around you, including your teacher, your loved ones, your parents, your friends. Yet engage with others. Things that they do that are harmful in their own lives, allow them to see that themselves.

A child likes to eat chocolate all the time. Eating too much chocolate leads to a bad stomach or cavities. From that child's perspective, let that child know. Don't inject yourself with "I don't like chocolate, so I'm going to tell everyone else not to like chocolate." That would be problematic.

So what is the practice? Don't grasp, don't reject – do engage. That's the practice of seeing self-nature. Allow your self-nature to function freely

without being caught up. That's also wisdom, it's also true suchness.

So why do they hear the Dharma without being able to become enlightened? Because of the profundity of their false views and layered afflictions! Just as if great clouds are blocking the sun, unless a wind blows [them away], the light of the sun will not be visible.

That's good news. At least the sun is there. Within all of us, the sun is originally there. It's just that there are these clouds. That's why practice is necessary. Never despise vexations; don't follow them, either. That is the wind of Dharma, the pure spring breeze that will blow the clouds away. Don't reify the clouds as things, like telling yourself "I have a problem. I have an anger issue. I am vexed." These are vexations; these narratives reify them, objectify them, and bring them into reality.

## Correct Views

One should just constantly activate correct views in one's own mind, [GG: What is correct view? Remind yourself. Mindfulness.] and the enervating defilement of afflictions will be rendered permanently unable to defile you.

How do you do it? Constantly bring forth correct view. Practice. It's all good. The sun is always present; it's just that there are clouds covering it right now. Don't reify the clouds as a permanent part of the sun. The furniture is not the room. The room itself is free. Non-abiding.

Good friends, one should not reside within or without, and one's going and coming should



be autonomous [GG: free and at ease]. One who is able to eradicate the mind of attachment will [attain] penetration unhindered. Those who are able to cultivate this practice are fundamentally no different from [what is described in] the *Prajna Sutra*.

Practicing the way of prajna – isn't that wonderful? Always bring forth the correct view. But most people don't bring forth the correct view. They bring forth their own narratives. That is to victimize themselves and reify, to solidify vexations, and to solidify the narrative. That is what Huineng calls "Dwelling on the past thought, present thought, and the future thought. Therefore, thought after thought of successive moments, you will be fettered."

Instead of bringing up these habitual ways of seeing ourselves, we bring forth correct view: It's all good. If something's not good, that means we are making it not good. So, make it good.

Good friends, if one is unenlightened, then the buddhas are sentient beings. When one is enlightened for [even] a single moment, then sentient beings are buddhas.

Another way of seeing no-thought, no-form, and non-abiding is that these three relate to the practice of precepts, meditation, and wisdom; the three higher learnings. Non-abiding is wisdom, prajna. No-thought is the practice, chan. Precepts deal with form - behaviors, external actions, interacting with the world. The world? It is formless. That is the Chan view.

Precepts, meditation, and wisdom are not three distinct things. Don't reify them into *things*. They are one. They are just three ways of expressing freedom, wisdom, and compassion, to engage with the world proactively without self-grasping. To put into practice these three principles is the most compassionate thing we can do to help others. ☸

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 向馬說世人生死事大汝等門

# The Legacy of the Platform Sutra

BY  
DAN STEVENSON

Dan Stevenson is a Professor of Buddhist Studies at Kansas University. As a graduate student at Columbia University, Dan was one of Master Sheng Yen's earliest Western disciples. He co-authored Master Sheng Yen's *Hoofprint of the Ox* (Oxford University Press, 2002), which is possibly the Master's most comprehensive statement in a single volume of Chan aspiration and methodology. For our special issue on the *Platform Sutra*, Dr. Stevenson has kindly given us an essay that is rich and deep in scholarship and detail.



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TODAY IT IS RARE TO FIND an English language sourcebook or survey of Chan/Zen history that does not feature Huineng and the *Platform Sutra* front and center. The story of his humble origins and illiteracy, his fortuitous encounter with the *Diamond Sutra* and fated search for Fifth Patriarch Hongren at Huangmei, his posting of the mind-mirror verse in response to Shenxiu's flawed couplet, followed by his receiving of the "mind-Dharma" and acclamation as the Sixth Patriarch of Chan from Hongren – such episodes are known to all. Meanwhile, Huineng's pronouncements in the *Platform Sutra* on such themes as the formless precepts, intrinsic buddha-nature, mind-only Pure Land, and the verse on the formless are routinely singled out as required readings for anyone who aspires to a basic knowledge of Chan/Zen teaching. Selections to this effect appear just as readily in W.T. de Bary's classic *Sources of Chinese Tradition* (1960 and 2000) as D.T. Suzuki's *Manual of Zen Buddhism* (1935) and Master Sheng Yen's *Essentials of Chan Practice and Attainment* (禪門修證指要 *Chanmen Xiuzheng Zhiyao*) (1980). From the time Master Sheng Yen first began to teach classes at the Temple of Enlightenment in the Bronx (in New York City) (1976), the verse on the formless was featured as a central part of his introductory courses on Chan meditation.

The text of the *Platform Sutra*, however, has not always enjoyed such attention, much less universal and unambiguous acclaim. Surprisingly little mention of the work appears in Tang (618–902), Five Dynasties (902–960) and Song period (960–1279) Chinese sources – the era of Chan's formation and rise to historical efflorescence. Though mention of the text, or allusion to some of its more celebrated episodes does appear sporadically in early hagiographies of Huineng, the better part of those hagiographies is taken up with account after account of transformative

Chan-style exchanges between Huineng and his students that are much more reminiscent of the sort of iconoclastic "encounter-dialogue" repartee that would subsequently become the focus of Chan *gongan* (*kōan*) practice. Virtually none of those encounter-dialogue episodes recounted in the classic hagiographies and Chan histories appear in extant early exemplars of the *Platform Sutra*, just as the Chan hagiographies of Huineng make scant mention of such celebrated passages and episodes from the *Platform Sutra* as the mind-verses of Shenxiu and Huineng, the aforementioned bestowing of the formless precepts, or the verse on the formless.

## Denied Canonical Sanction

The first historically poignant effort to bring national attention to the *Platform Sutra* did not come so much with the imperial recognition of Huineng as the Sixth Chan Patriarch in ninth century Tang China. It came some two centuries later under the Northern Song Dynasty (960–1127). Intent on cementing imperial sanction for the Chan tradition and its claim to a continuous "mind-to-mind" transmission of the Dharma that extended back to the historical Buddha, the Yunmen Chan master Qisong (1007–1072), having gained the attention of the Song emperor Renzong (r. 1022–1063) and various well-placed officials at his court, set out to acquire imperial approval for inclusion of the *Platform Sutra* in the state sanctioned Kaibao Buddhist printed canon. It was the first such effort of its kind to acquire official "canonical status" for the *Platform Sutra* beyond its otherwise ad hoc circulation among Chan adherents. Qisong's effort apparently fell through, though several sweeping genealogical treatises on Chan lineage authored by Master Qisong were approved for inclusion in the Kaibao Canon.

Qisong's remarks on his endeavor to reclaim the *Platform Sutra* from its relative obscurity are telling, for he notes therein that for some two years he sought out extant versions of the text before he finally obtained a copy that he deemed sufficiently complete and faithful to Huineng's words to be collated for publication. It was that copy, duly corrected and edited by Qisong, which Qisong pledged to disseminate. Records from the Northern Song that bear on the production of the Kaibao Canon and its supplements do not mention the *Platform Sutra*, nor tell us why the text was denied canonical inclusion. However, not long after the Kaibao Canon was published, the reigning emperor of the northern Khitan kingdom of Liao (916–1125) ordered monastic scholars at his court to compile a catalog of extant Indian and Chinese Buddhist works with sufficient pedigree to be granted admission to a Liao Buddhist Canon akin to that of the Song. The *Platform Sutra*, among various other Chan works, was summarily banned and ordered burned on the grounds that it was a fraudulent work. Thus in addition to having a tenuously diffused existence since its inception in the late eighth century, the content of the *Platform Sutra* itself was viewed by some with deep suspicion. The strongest opposition, of course, came from Buddhist monastics and laity less inclined to Chan teaching. Yet as we shall see, that suspicion has from time to time extended to Chan adherents as well.

Though denied canonical sanction by the Song court, Qisong's new edition of the *Platform Sutra* apparently did see public circulation, albeit – like the burgeoning supply of “recorded sayings” collections retrospectively assigned to Tang masters of the Chan “golden age” – through private and local auspices. A second, early Song edition of the text produced by Huixin, (ca. 967), of which Qisong may or may not have been aware, also found purchase

as an independently circulating work. However, under such exigent circumstances it apparently did not take long for both the Qisong and Huixin versions of the *Platform Sutra* to fall prey to alteration and general neglect.

## Zongbao and Deyi

Not until some three centuries after Qisong do we again see a concerted effort to produce a critically edited, standardized version of the *Platform Sutra* for public consumption. Within a year of one another, two closely related – and what appear to be significantly expanded – editions of the “orthodox” canonical text that we know today as the *Dharma-Jewel Platform Sutra of the Sixth Patriarch*, were produced, respectively, in 1290 and 1291 by the Yuan-period Chan monks Zongbao 宗寶 and Deyi 德異. Tellingly, Deyi recounts in his 1290 preface how, having come across an ancient copy of the *Platform Sutra* when he was a young man, he sought widely for over thirty years before he was able to locate what he judged to be a complete and clean copy worthy of collation and publication. Along similar lines, Zongbao notes in his 1291 postscript:

My first entry to the way was inspired by this [text]. I subsequently came across three editions [of the work, the contents of which] were not uniform with one another. There were significant [discrepancies] in strength and weakness; their printing blocks were also in decay. I accordingly took up and proceeded to critically collate [these three versions]. Where there were errors, I corrected them; where there were omissions, I fleshed out the details. I also added [narrative of] the [encounter dialogue] exchanges and circumstances [of awakening] involving [Huineng

and his] disciples, so that the multitude of [later] students might fully grasp the teaching of Caoqi [Huineng].

Critical studies of the Deyi and Zongbao editions, together with their textual predecessors, point to a version of the *Platform Sutra* derived from Huixin's tenth century text, with subsequent expansions by the Song lay scholar Chao Jiong (ca. 1031) and his descendent, Chao Zijian (ca. 1153), as the textual lineage on which both Zongbao and Deyi principally drew for the *Dharma-Jewel Platform Sutra of the Sixth Patriarch*. From the remarks of Zongbao and Deyi we know that transmission to have been subject to considerable emendation, while Zongbao boldly took it upon himself to “augment Caoxi [Huineng's] import” by deliberately inserting material into the existing text drawn from other Chan sources. Three to four decades later, with the collapse of the Yuan and rise of the Ming Dynasty (1368–1644), it is that version amplified by Zongbao that finally, for the first time, saw official inclusion in an imperially sponsored Buddhist canon as the “orthodox” *Dharma-Jewel Platform Sutra of the Sixth Patriarch* (六祖大師法寶壇經 *Liuzu dahi fabao tan jing*, T no. 2008).

The first century of the Ming Dynasty (1368–1644) witnessed the production of three separate imperially commissioned editions of the Chinese Buddhist Canon: the northern Hongwu (Jianwen) Canon (1399–1403), Yongle Southern Canon (1413–1420), and Yongle Northern Canon (1414–1440). Catalogues and extant exemplars indicate that Zongbao's fourteenth century edition of the *Platform Sutra* succeeded in obtaining official sanction and inclusion in those collections. Prior to that event, we find no exemplars or mention of the *Platform Sutra* in either imperially or privately printed editions of the Chinese Buddhist Canon, a situation that appears to have

relegated the text to existence as a locally printed or hand-written manuscript copy of the sort reported by Deyi and Zongbao. Variation in its contents was inevitable. And indeed, as Qisong himself observed two centuries earlier, catalogues of the holdings of Southern Song and Yuan private libraries show routine discrepancies in both the length and title of the text. With the *Platform Sutra's* official canonization in the early Ming, that situation seems to have changed substantially. The content appears to have stabilized; its dissemination and national profile was significantly enhanced; and sources suggest that the text subsequently garnered a level of attention in Chan circles far above that of previous eras.

Evidence to this effect becomes particularly clear when one looks for trace references to the text and its more celebrated passages or episodes in the extended range of Chan and alternative Buddhist literatures from Five Dynasties, Song, Yuan, down into the early Ming (i.e., tenth to fifteenth centuries). Therein we find (to the best of my knowledge) no mention of any commentary of significance ever having been written on the *Platform Sutra*. Nor do historical records (e.g., Chan “recorded sayings,” epitaphs for eminent Chan monastics) indicate that the text was ever the subject of a dedicated lecture series from the high seat of Chan public monasteries. What is more, rarely do epitaphs, memoranda, and sermons of eminent Chan masters of the period make overt mention of their having actively read, studied, or taught the *Platform Sutra*. (Of course, Qisong is a noted exception.)

## Surge in Public Interest

Huineng himself, though hailed as the Sixth Patriarch of Chan, was never enshrined centrally in Chan patriarch halls, the altars of which standardly featured the three figures of Bodhidharma, Baizhang Huaihai

(creator of the archetypal Chan monastery regimen), and the monastery's founding abbot.

Moreover, the person of Huineng was never, under any circumstances, hailed, enshrined, and venerated *literally* as a buddha on a par with Śākyamuni and Amitābha, much less the *Platform Sutra* (*Tan jing*), despite its suggestive title, afforded the level of sanctity and ritualized devotion accorded the *sutras* (*jing*) of the Buddha. (For example, the *Avatamsaka* [*Huayan*] *Sutra* or the *Lotus* [*Fahua*] *Sutra*.) As noted previously, celebrated episodes of the *Platform Sutra*, such as the exchange of verses between Shenxiu and Huineng, Huineng's bestowal of the formless

precepts, and, to a large extent, even the verse on the formless appear to have shared a similarly undistinguished reception. Digital searches of Chan sources ranging in date from the end of the Tang through the Song and Yuan – roughly the late ninth through the mid-fourteenth centuries – make virtually no mention of them. Rather, the utterances and episodes concerning Huineng that we *do* find featured in Chan Dharma hall sermons, informal sessions of instruction, and face to face master-disciple tutelage in the abbot's quarters are by and large taken not from the pages of the *Platform Sutra*, but from celebrated Chan genealogical *Transmission of the Lamp*

histories – those very Chan works that *did* see canonical sanction in the Song. Indeed, it is precisely *that* sort of ancillary, fictionalized encounter-dialogue exchange between Huineng and his disciples, drawn from the Chan genealogical “lamp” histories that we find progressively inserted into the *Platform Sutra* by the likes of Huixin, Qisong, Chao Jiong, and Zongbao.

It would be a stretch to posit that the Ming period canonization and imperial printing of Zongbao's edition of the *Platform Sutra* was the singular factor that contributed to the evident surge in public interest and consumption of the text that occurred during this period. Yet a surge in interest does appear to have taken place in the wake of the text's

incorporation into the Ming Buddhist canon. Unlike previous eras, by the late fifteenth and sixteenth centuries we begin to see substantial references to the *Platform Sutra* and its contents in sermons, instructional exchanges, and personal correspondence of Chan recorded sayings collections.

One of the more striking developments in this regard is the frequency with which the text comes to be mentioned in epitaphs of eminent Chan masters of the period, particularly where time and again encounter with the *Platform Sutra* is hailed as the turning point that inspired the given individual to seek the Chan path. One of the earliest records of this sort – and, hence, something of an exception – comes from the Yuan period Caodong Chan master Fangshan Wenbao, who flourished during 1271–1308, and who at the age twenty-eight is said to have abandoned lay life and Pure Land devotion and turned decidedly to Chan practice upon reading the *Platform Sutra*. The late-Ming early-Qing Chan master Zongbao Daodu (1600–1661) reports a similar experience:

This mountain monk from an early age set out to practice the way, but though tormented with the thought of birth and death, I knew not where to turn. Later I chanced to read the [line in the] *Platform Sutra*, “Upon seeing the original nature, one becomes a buddha.” It was like a nail driving into wood. By every possible means I had to seek insight into the original nature.

Indeed, two of the four celebrated “great Buddhist masters of the Ming,” the Chan master Zibo Zhenke (1543–1603) and the illustrious Hanshan Deqing (1546–1623), both claimed personal inspiration from the *Platform Sutra* and publicly trumpeted the text as “the most effective compass for the Dharmagate of the mind ground (i.e., Chan).”

## Reservations

Yet even with this growing enthusiasm not all parties were so uniformly positive on the text, including those very individuals who credited the text with having initially inspired their turn to Chan practice. The aforementioned Yongjue Yuanxian, for example, says of his own experience with Chan practice: “At age eighteen, I chanced to obtain and read a copy of the *Platform Sutra of the Sixth Patriarch*. Upon seeing the perfect marvelousness and vastness of its exposition I was overcome with joy overjoyed and [mistakenly] thought I had actually attained something.” Yuanxian goes on to explain how his subsequent years of struggle with Chan practice proved his initial perception not only to be gravely mistaken, but a serious impediment to his own personal practice and progress. That very same problem he also found to be widespread in Chan circles. Yuanxian explains:

These days across the south (Chu) there are a lot of people who promote this sort of [intellectual] understanding, largely because they are bereft of any genuine experience of awakening. They merely take up such texts as the *Platform Sutra of the Sixth Patriarch*, Baizhang's *Expanded Record*, or Huangbo's *Essentials of Mind* and conjure up some concise and clichéd intellectual model. As a result, in their brains their thoughts fixate on realms of empty quiescence, which they declare to be some sort of primal energy or ground of being prior to the arising of joy and anger, grief and happiness.

Hanshan Deqing, though equally taken with the *Platform Sutra* as a beginning Chan practitioner, also expressed his reservations about its popular dissemination:



*The Platform Sutra of the Sixth Patriarch* is the absolute best compass to the teaching of the mind-ground (i.e., Chan). It is just that persons of middling capacity are unable to fully grasp [its contents] due to their lack of prowess [in the practice]. The single text of the *Collected [Writings] of Yongjia (Yongjia ji)* is actually a footnote to the *Platform Sutra*. If one were to rely on the Sixth Patriarch for outlook and orientation and apply effort [in practice] according to Yongjia, what trouble could one not instantly overcome.

Deqing's contemporary, the noted Yunqi Zhuhong, goes so far as to remark:

If one seizes on the single perspective of the *[Platform] Sutra*, they will do harm to [the historical] lifespan of [the Buddha's] wisdom. I have felt that the *Platform Sutra of the Sixth Patriarch* should not be shown to persons who lack wisdom, out of the primary consideration that they will cling to it and reject everything else.

The widespread appeal of the *Platform Sutra*, of course, is not difficult to understand, given its highly personalized and dramatic narrative content. But upon examining in depth its individual discourses, ambiguities were apparently seen to abound, the presence of which, according to Ming masters such as Yuanxian, were capable of fostering impediment and error. One such oft-mentioned problem appears to have been the gravitation to a substantialist image of intrinsic buddha-nature and quietistic approach to Chan practice suggested by such lines as "Bodhi is your original nature, giving rise to thoughts is illusion; pure mind abides within illusion, but when set right, it is free of the three obstructions." Or, "When the essence of mind stands apart from thoughts, that

is virtue or merit, to not depart from the self-nature, that is effort or accomplishment."

As Yongjue Yuanxian and others take pains to note, such representations differed significantly from passages in the text akin to the following: "The Buddha's Dharma lies in the very midst of [this] world, one does not awaken by departing or leaving the world behind. To seek bodhi by leaving the world behind is like seeking horns on a hare." Yuanxian's near contemporary, the Chan master Yanju Shen of Mount Yun in refutation of "misguided" substantialist and quietistic readings of the *Platform Sutra*, states:

If the Sixth Patriarch ultimately wanted to teach that awakening is attained only when one banishes and leaves behind all conditioning circumstances and objects, the patriarch would not have taught people saying, "Buddhadharma is within the mundane world and is to be realized without departing mundane existence, so to seek bodhi apart from mundane existence is like seeking horns on a hare." Nor should he have said, "In full engagement with objects and mental factors, give rise to bodhi."

In support of his point, Yanju Shen harkens back to Dahui Zongga'o's (1089–1163) activist approach to *huatou* practice, which Dahui promoted specifically as a counter to what he saw to be an overly intellectualized and reified Chan quietism. Echoing the criticisms of Yanju Shen, Yuanxian, and Dahui, the late-Ming Chan master Miyin dramatically condemns those who would take the *Platform Sutra* to advocate adherence to samadhi and banishment of all discriminatory thinking to a fate of swallowing molten iron balls in Yama's purgatorial court. "These days it is difficult to find even one person among dozens," Miyin concludes, "who is not afflicted with this sickness."

## From "Pure Land in the Mind" to "Mind in the Pure Land"

In addition to the obstacles that a substantialist "mind-only" view of intrinsic enlightenment might pose for Buddhist contemplation, the critiques offered by Song masters such as Dahui and Siming Zhili (960–1028) anticipate yet another, related point of controversy that arose from the *Platform Sutra's* representation of the mind and its essential nature. That controversy centered on the Sixth Patriarch's famously reductive "mind-only" disquisition on Pure Land practice. Citing Vimālakīrti's oft-quoted assertion that "when the mind is pure, the land is pure," Huineng proceeds to say:

Ignorant people who do not know their original self-nature and are not aware that the Pure Land is within this very body and person pray to [be reborn in a pure land in] the east or pray to [be reborn in a pure land in] the west. For this reason the Buddha instructs, "Wherever one abides there is always ease and joy (i.e., a pure land)."

With statements such as this, the *Platform Sutra's* propensity to reduce all external differentiation to the status of "deluded thinking," and the essence of existence itself to an undifferentiated "suchness" internal to the mind, drifts into the domain of soteriology. The Mahayana cosmos and its vast array of buddhas and buddha lands become mere fictive conjurings of the psyche. Cherished salvific figures such as Amitābha Buddha become, as it were, "the original nature" and his Western Pure Land of Sukhāvātī a product of "mind-only", the true origin and essence of which reside strictly within this individual "body and person". Of course, when viewed in its larger discursive and historical scope, this notion of "Amitābha as the

original nature and the Pure Land as mind-only" proves to be a far more nuanced and sophisticated concept than the *Platform Sutra* would suggest. But as presented in Huineng's overly simplistic charter sermon, that "original nature" and "mind" is no longer a boundless mind or nature coextensive with the cosmos (dharmadhātu). It is relegated to the confines of "this very body" or "person," while delusion finds its expression in "seeking externally to the east or west."

As one might well expect, persuasive critiques of this trend to psychologistic reduction have been mounted frequently over the past millennium, especially by monastics of Buddhist schools other than Chan. The Northern Song Tiantai masters Siming Zhili and Ciyun Zunshi (964–1032) both wrote on the subject, poignantly refuting its reduction of the manifold pluralities of existence at large – including buddhas, pure lands, and the virtues of seeking rebirth therein – to a denuded mind-only subjectivism. Zunshi, for example, argues:

Some say, "If the Pure Land resides in the mind, why should one seek for it externally? If the buddha-land is pure when the mind is purified, what use is it to distantly seek rebirth in a pure land someplace else?"

I explain: "They still do not have a good grasp of the meaning of mind and land. They take this mind of self to dwell in the square inch [of the heart-mind faculty] and regard the Pure Land to be a realm lying distantly outside. Now if that were the case, then how could one say that 'the pure land is pure when the mind is purified?'"

The *Avatamsaka (Huayan) Sutra* states that the three [aspects of] mind, buddha, and sentient beings are inseparable and without difference. If the aspect of the Buddha is all-pervading, then the aspect of mind is all-pervading. If each were to

constitute a separate domain, then how could one say that they are without difference? Moreover, should one posit that the all-suffusing mind and dharmadhātu are akin to [undifferentiated] empty space, then how could there be division? Now, if one understands that each single instant of thought is itself all-pervading, and that each single mote of [external] sense object is likewise all-pervading, then how could all of the myriad miniscule realms [of external sensory object and experience] be apart from the mind? When people today talk of the principle of emptiness, they end up dismissing [the hard realities of karmic] cause and effect, and when they talk of the self-mind [and its nature] they then don't believe that there can be external phenomena.

Coming at the issue from a more explicitly salvific perspective, the Vinaya master Lingzhi Yuanzhao (1048–1116) says:

The Sixth Patriarch [of Chan] says that this very mind is the Buddha, so what need is there to seek [a buddha or rebirth in a Pure Land] to the west. He claims that one need simply point to the mind of intrinsic enlightenment that is directly at hand, the nature of which is itself the Pure Land. But in truth, only the buddhas have come to fully inhabit and actualize this [intrinsically enlightened nature]. Ordinary unenlightened beings may never [in principle] be parted from it, but they are not yet able to manifest it in the form of full and perfect awakening.

As recent scholarship has noted, the penchant among historians for the more radically iconoclastic brand of Linji Chan has tended to marginalize the significance of Chan liaisons with Pure Land or related

Buddhist devotional practices. Yet we not infrequently find injunctions to Pure Land devotion and views resonant with those of Zunshi and Yuanzhao in Chan circles that entertained a more eclectic approach to Chan and Buddhist practice. (To wit, influential figures in the Fayen and Yunmen lines of Chan such as Yongming Yanshou and Changlu Zongze, as well as such noted Linji Chan masters of the late Song and Yuan as Zhongfeng Mingben and his master Gaofeng Yuanmiao.) With the late-Ming period, they become even more prolific. Yunqi Zhuhong, renowned for his advocating of the “dual cultivation of Chan and Pure Land,” is particularly scathing of the *Platform Sutra's* representations of Pure Land practice, when he states:

The Sixth Patriarch in the *Platform Sutra* declares that he was illiterate, and throughout his entire life he never used a brush [to write]. *The Platform Sutra* is in its entirety a record produced by others, and hence it is filled with errors. [...] Is it really possible that the Sixth Patriarch did not teach people to seek rebirth in the Pure Land where they will meet the Buddha, but only urged them to seek rebirth in the mundane heavens [through cultivation of] the ten wholesome deeds? [The text's] lack of credibility is obvious. Hence one should know that to seize upon the *Platform Sutra* and reject the Pure Land is an error grave in the extreme.

Pursuant to the epistemological critiques of a reductive “mind-only” view of buddha-nature mounted by the likes of Dahui and Zhili, one could effectively argue that the very defiling propensities that give rise to deluded thinking, karma-producing action, and the afflictions of samsara are themselves the very “stuff” of a bodhisattva's and buddha's boundless



Photo by Ven. Chang Duo

salvific activity. A bodhisattva or buddha would be unable to do the work of compassion without them. Pursuant to this line of thinking, the Tiantai Buddhist master Siming Zhili boldly posited that the evil and defiling propensities of samsara must, by definition, be endemic to buddha-nature itself, for if they were qualitatively separate from and adventitious to it – and bodhisattvas or buddhas were to achieve full awakening by eradicating them – bodhisattvas and buddhas could not possibly function in samsara as compassionate bodhisattvas and buddhas. Nor could ritual veneration and prayers directed to them be efficacious. And indeed, disquisitions to this effect appear with some frequency in Buddhist writings past and present. That, however, is a subject for another occasion.

As inspirational as many later readers found the text to be, it was precisely such internal disparities as those touched upon above that prompted the likes of Hanshan Deqing to caution against sharing the *Platform Sutra* with persons of middling insight,

and Zhuhong strategically to marginalize the text as a flawed and disparate compilation of Huineng's followers that is “not from the actual brush of the patriarch himself.”

## Parting Thoughts

Where might this leave the *Platform Sutra* as we think back over its complex and varied history in later China? Clearly, our perspectives on the subject are limited by the sources at our disposal. Yet from the resources we have at hand, it would appear that, despite Huineng's exalted historical status and the endearing appeal of the *Platform Sutra's* lively narrative, the text led a rather tenuous existence and carried limited – or at best, episodic – purchase in the institutionalized regimens of Chan monastic culture prior to its canonization (and stabilization) in the Ming Dynasty. Though subsequently acclaimed in the late-Ming and Qing periods for its inspirational value as an entrée to Chan teaching and practice, it was also not infrequently viewed with misgiving for its perceived propensity to mislead. That conjoined sense of appeal and reservation seems to have characterized the reception of the *Platform Sutra* throughout its history.

Alterations and expansions of the scripture's text appear to have been endemic to the life of the *Platform Sutra* from the time of its first appearance. Sufficiently so for the tenth century Buddhist historian Zanning to take note of the widespread perception that the work had been actively “altered by later followers.” And indeed, when we come to later editors such as Qisong and Zongbao, we find the outright assertion that they did not simply collate, remove spurious material, and seek to establish the original words and import of Huineng as one might classically do for sutras spoken by the Buddha. They took it

upon themselves deliberately to augment the received text with new material and alter existing content to convey what they understood to be Huineng's true intended import. Here, perhaps, we catch glimmer of a textual hermeneutic that is particularly unique to Chan Buddhism. As Albert Welter and others have recently observed, many if not most of the recorded discourses and sermons of the beloved masters of the "golden age" of late-Tang Chan, such as Mazu Daoyi or Linji Yixuan – and even Huineng himself – were progressively expanded and enlivened with addition of iconoclastic Chan rhetoric, illocutionary gesture, and fictionalized episodes of "encounter dialogue."

That record of willful emendation and historical instability is perhaps also evident when Qisong makes a point of apologetically noting in a subscribed comment on use of the term *jing* (scripture, sutra) in the title of the *Platform Sutra*, "That it has come to be called a 'sutra' arises [strictly] from the fact that persons [after Huineng] esteemed his teaching, not the intention of the Sixth Patriarch himself." Or Zongbao, two centuries later remarks, "The Dharma preached in former times by the Sixth Patriarch is itself in every respect the perfect and sudden meaning of the Mahayana. Thus we characterize it as a 'scripture or sutra' (*jing*)."

Doubtlessly much of the cachet that the *Platform Sutra* garnered in the Song and later eras comes precisely from the inspirational impact of the dramatic narrative vernacular stylizations that later purveyors of the *Platform Sutra* progressively added to the text. Indeed, such alteration is perfectly in keeping with the vernacular transformations that Chan encounter dialogue anecdotes underwent in course of their dramatic retelling from the high seat of the Chan Dharma hall or during personalized instruction in the abbot's quarters. And indeed, such license to extemporize on classic Chan disquisitions with the aim

to convey more effectively their intended meaning would seem quite in keeping with the entire Chan conceit of "mind-to-mind transmission" and "direct pointing to the nature of the mind." It also inevitably leads to friction when differing perspectives come to the fore. Hence the repeated effort to reclaim Huineng's original message by purging the *Platform Sutra* of suspect "alterations made by later followers," or the Chan fallback apology that the true import of Huineng's words was too abstruse for all but persons of the highest spiritual capacity truly capable of reading between the lines.

Given this rather episodic and miasmic history, we might close by asking just what were the constellation of factors that precipitated the *Platform Sutra's* more recent extraordinary rise to public view and prominence as a "Chan/Zen classic" in the eyes of Buddhist historians and Chan practitioners? Much of that gravitas can likely be assigned to the impact of scholarly studies and translations that came with the discovery of early manuscript copies (dated 830–860 CE) of the *Platform Sutra* at Dunhuang during the early twentieth century. Indeed, we are left to wonder whether Master Sheng Yen's own adoption of the text's verse on the formless as curriculum for his meditation classes was not indebted to these two streams of influence, especially with his having spent so many years of study in Japan.

As with his Chan predecessors, even then a need for nuance seems to have been at work in Master Sheng Yen's posture on the text. I recall years ago, while living with the early community at Nongchan Monastery in Taiwan, Master Sheng Yen during the course of a lecture series that touched on themes of "intrinsic buddhahood" resonant with the *Platform Sutra* once urged me in passing to read the works of Siming Zhili on the subject, the perspective of which he commended highly. 🌿

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