

Three Zen Sutras

The Heart Sutra,

The Diamond Sutra,

and The Platform Sutra

Translated by

Red Pine

इह शारपित् रूपं
शून्यता शून्यतैव रूपं
रूपान्न पृथक्शून्यता

THREE ZEN SUTRAS

Three Zen Sutras

THE HEART SUTRA,
THE DIAMOND SUTRA,
AND
THE PLATFORM SUTRA

TRANSLATED BY

Red Pine

COUNTERPOINT
Berkeley, California

COUNTERPOINTS 7

Contents

Introduction

The Heart Sutra

The Diamond Sutra

The Platform Sutra

Addendum

Notes

Introduction

When the people of ancient India began exploring who they were, they began the same way we might today. They concluded that there was something outside themselves and something inside, and they were somewhere in between. They called the outside *rupa*, or form, and the inside *nama*, what you can name but can't see. Over time, they came up with a number of approaches to find the self they were certain was there, each with a different emphasis. For those who focused on the inside, there were the nesting dolls of the skandhas; for those who focused on the outside, there were the sensory-based *ayatanas*; and for those who focused on both, there were the all-embracing *dhatus*. Like a doctor prescribing medicine for different ailments, the Buddha sent his disciples on wild-goose chases into each of these realms circumscribing the extent of our awareness. He also prescribed the temporal scheme of the *nidanas* he used when he achieved Enlightenment, and he even recommended the Four Truths¹ and Eightfold Path, the subjects of his first teaching. But no matter where the Buddha sent his disciples, they would eventually return and admit their failure. When they did, he would ask, "So?" And if they failed to conclude that there was no self, he would send them off again into yet another mind-body realm.²

In the centuries following Sakyamuni's Nirvana, a number of sects arose that looked at these quests the Buddha had recommended and concluded that although he had used them to drive home the lesson that there was no self, the realms themselves were real—otherwise, why would the Buddha have recommended them? For these sects, the skandhas, the ayatanas, the dhatus, the nidanas, the Four Truths, the Eightfold Path, even nirvana—all of

them were real. They called them dharmas, “what can be grasped,” and made matrices linking them. They held that by studying the relationships among these dharmas they could become enlightened.

This marked the rise of the Abhidharma, or “Dharmology,” schools, which occurred in the third century B.C. However, not everyone agreed with such a view, and resistance to it eventually gave rise to the Prajnaparamita teachings in the second century B.C. and to such sutras as the Heart and the Diamond soon after. Just as people nowadays believe the world is made of atoms, these Abhidharma schools believed that dharmas were the elemental constituents of our experience of reality, that somehow they existed by themselves. In a word—a Sanskrit word—they possessed *svabhava*, or “self-existence.” The Prajnaparamita countered this with its own word: *sunyata*, or “emptiness.” The proponents of Prajnaparamita weren’t interested in negating the existence of tables and chairs or form and consciousness, only the self-existence of tables and chairs or form and consciousness. Nothing, they held, exists by itself. In fact, its very “thingness” is something we bestow on it. Whatever we might designate as an object or a dharma is simply a convenient fiction.

The Heart Sutra applied this view of emptiness to the Abhidharma categories of the Sarvastivadins, as they were the most influential of all the schools that upheld a dharma-based view of reality. This briefest of sutras not only rejected the self-existence of each of the Sarvastivadin sets of dharmas, it presented something in their place, a mantra for chanting to go beyond conception-based understandings of reality. Seeing language itself as an impediment to understanding, teachers of Prajnaparamita were open to alternatives.

The word they chose for their ineffable teaching was a Sanskrit compound made up of *prajna*, meaning “wisdom” or “knowing,” and *paramita*, meaning “supreme” or “transcendent.” They added the adjective *paramita* to differentiate their knowing from that of others. Unlike many of the sects that developed after the Buddha’s Nirvana, they didn’t focus on the acquisition of knowledge, or *jnana*, but on the transcendence of knowledge. Their emphasis was on what comes before knowledge, which was the meaning of the *pra*

("before") in *prajna*. Knowledge was viewed as delusion posing as truth. Prajnaparamita was interested in the mind before it knows—our "original face," as Zen masters came to call it.

When this teaching first appeared two thousand years ago in the Indian subcontinent, it was also accompanied by a change in how those who accepted it viewed the path they should follow. Instead of the quest for nirvana and the end to rebirth advocated by the early followers of the Buddha, the followers of the Prajnaparamita chose the bodhisattva path, leading to enlightenment and no end to rebirth until all beings are liberated.

Among the texts that conveyed this message, none has received a wider or more lasting reception in Asia—or in the West—than the Diamond Sutra. Considered as dating back to the first century B.C., if not earlier, it is one of the most profound of all Prajnaparamita texts, focusing on the bodhisattva path itself and what happens to those who choose to follow it.

It begins simply enough with the Buddha returning from his daily begging round and being asked by his disciple Subhuti how people should set forth on the same path the Buddha followed. The Buddha responds by telling Subhuti and all those present that they should vow to liberate others—not just themselves, but all others. What follows is an account of how people become buddhas and the importance of merit—merit being the spiritual result of a spiritual act.³ The Buddha tells an audience of monks and lay followers that if they can do as he suggests, and do so without being attached to the idea they are liberating anyone, they will obtain a limitless, inconceivable "body of merit."

The Buddha then asks Subhuti if he sees him. This seems like an odd question at first, but it is the question around which this sutra turns. Subhuti already understands the Buddha's teaching of emptiness, that anything one might point to is only real in the sense that it is being pointed to and otherwise empty. Naturally, this would include the nirmana-kaya, or body of physical attributes, which the Buddha himself acquired when he became a buddha, so Subhuti answers, "No."

Taking Subhuti at his word, that he wants to know how to follow the bodhisattva path, the Buddha introduces him to what underlies

that path. The Buddha tells him, “By means of attributes that are not attributes, the Tathagata can, indeed, be seen.” The body he wants Subhuti to see is the one he himself acquired when he began his own journey on the bodhisattva path, the one those who vow to liberate others likewise acquire.

The sutra then becomes a revelation of the spiritual reality of the path introduced to the Buddhist world by the Prajnaparamita teachings. However, being one of the briefest of such texts, it limits itself to the beginning and the end of that path. Also, as the Buddha focuses on these, he reiterates that he speaks only of what isn’t real—the implication being that what is real can’t be spoken of. This is not only true of the body of attributes he acquired when he became a buddha but also of the body of attributes that were not attributes he acquired when he first set forth on the path. Both bodies, it turns out, are mere flashes of lightning. The only thing real is the Dharma, represented in this sutra by the Prajnaparamita, a teaching that turns out to be no teaching.

It was this teaching, in the form of the Diamond Sutra, that Huineng 惠能 (A.D. 638–713) heard when he was delivering a load of firewood. That was all it took to set him off on the journey that led to the Platform Sutra 壇經 and to the spread of Zen throughout the world.

Of all the Buddhist texts originating in China, the Platform is the only one with “sutra” 經 in its title. Huineng’s followers viewed him as a buddha, and the sutra title stuck. The majority of the text records a talk Huineng gave while conferring the Zen precepts on a mostly lay audience numbering in the thousands. Huineng gave this talk in 681, ten years after he became the Sixth Patriarch of Zen and thirty-two years before he died. The talk was given in Shaoguan 韶關, a town two hundred kilometers north of the southern port city of Guangzhou—and twenty kilometers from Mount Caoxi 曹溪山, where Huineng lived and taught. This region wasn’t a stronghold of Chinese culture in those days, and Huineng himself was only half Chinese. His father was a banished official from North China who died shortly after Huineng was born, and he was raised by his mother, who belonged to one of the non-Han ethnic groups that made up a majority of the population in much of South China during the Tang.

The sutra begins with Huineng recounting his connection with Zen: how, after hearing only a few lines of the Diamond Sutra, he experienced an awakening and walked a thousand kilometers to the monastery where the Fifth Patriarch was teaching this text—and where he was derided for being an uncultured Southerner, and a “jungle dog” as well. His ethnic attire, if not his accent, doubtlessly gave him away. He was also illiterate, but that didn’t prevent him from understanding Zen.

Actually, being illiterate might have turned out to be an advantage. The teaching Huineng understood—the one handed down by Bodhidharma and his successors—eschewed reliance on words. When they did use them, it was to point people back to their minds. In his Bloodstream Sermon 血脈論, China’s First Patriarch taught, “This mind is the buddha.” In Trusting the Mind 信心銘, the Third Patriarch wrote, “Trust the mind free of dualities / free of dualities trust the mind.” Huineng got the message. His advice was “See your nature and become a buddha.” The emphasis wasn’t on the accumulation of knowledge but on the experience of one’s own nondualistic mind and the realization that one’s own nature was identical to that of a buddha. This must have sounded like sacrilege coming out of the mouth of an illiterate native of China’s uncultured South. What? You a buddha?

Buddha or not, no one has had a greater impact on Zen in China, and no Zen text has received as much attention as this record of his teaching. The text itself isn’t difficult. It’s just hard to put into practice. The language is straightforward—like Huineng himself, and his vocabulary couldn’t be simpler. Simple, though, doesn’t necessarily mean easy to grasp, and it helps to understand how he uses two words that are never far from his lips: “mind” and “nature.”

For Huineng, “mind” refers to the first six forms of consciousness—the five sensory forms and conceptual consciousness. And he splits “nature” into “dharma nature” and “buddha nature.” He uses the former to refer to the *alaya*, or eighth form of consciousness—he doesn’t include the seventh form, *manas* consciousness. And he uses the latter to refer to the tathagata-garbha—the *alaya*’s original or transformed state.⁴ At one point, he tells us “mind” is like the

kingdom, and “nature” like the king.⁵ And, of course, it’s your kingdom and your throne he’s talking about.

For Huineng, this was all that mattered. It’s not surprising that when he’s conferring the precepts on his audience, he doesn’t begin by talking about the precepts but about meditation and wisdom instead. Also noteworthy is how he treats these two members of Buddhism’s Three Pillars: as indivisible. Meditation, he says, is meaningless if not coupled with wisdom, and wisdom useless if not coupled with meditation. It is only after he has established the One Practice Samadhi of meditation-wisdom that he turns to the precepts and the vows that people make upon becoming Buddhists. But here, too, he reinterprets these through the mind-nature lens.

With Buddhism’s Three Pillars finally in place, Huineng talks to his audience about Zen.⁶ Normally, when we talk about a teaching, we expect to hear about concepts. But regarding Zen, Huineng says “no idea” is its doctrine, “no form” is its body, and “no attachment” is its foundation. Trying to talk about a teaching like Huineng’s—or to think about it—is like trying to grab water. Zen teachers like Huineng didn’t think of Zen as something that could be put into words—though they tried. It had to be put into practice. That was the whole point. How a person lived their life was what was important, and Huineng didn’t limit practice to the meditation cushion.

Since Huineng’s day, Zen has come a long way. Some of those monasteries in the Gan 潯 and Xiang 湘 River watersheds where Zen first flourished are still active, but Zen itself has “gone beyond.” Nowadays it’s practiced in living rooms and converted garages and repurposed churches around the world, where people are still sitting together, still reading these texts, still vowing to liberate all beings, one breath at a time.

THE HEART SUTRA

The noble Avalokitesvara¹ Bodhisattva,
while practicing the deep practice
of Prajnaparamita,
looked upon the Five Skandhas²
and seeing they were empty of self-existence, said, “Here,
Sariputra,³

form is emptiness, emptiness is form;
emptiness is not separate from form,
form is not separate from emptiness;
whatever is form is emptiness,
whatever is emptiness is form.⁴

The same holds for sensation and perception, memory and
consciousness.

Here, Sariputra,
all dharmas are defined by emptiness,
not by birth or destruction,
purity or defilement,
completeness or deficiency.

Therefore, Sariputra,
in emptiness there is no form,
no sensation, no perception,
no memory, and no consciousness;
no eye, no ear, no nose, no tongue,
no body, and no mind;⁵
no shape, no sound, no smell, no taste,
no feeling, and no thought;
no element of perception,
from eye to conceptual consciousness;⁶
no causal link,
from ignorance to old age and death,
or end of causal link,
from ignorance to old age and death;⁷

no suffering, no source, no relief, no path;⁸
no knowledge, no attainment,
and no non-attainment.
Therefore, Sariputra, without attainment
bodhisattvas take refuge in Prajnaparamita
and live without walls of the mind.
Without walls of the mind
and thus without fears,
they see through delusion and finally nirvana.
All buddhas past, present, and future
also take refuge in Prajnaparamita
and realize unexcelled, perfect enlightenment.
You should therefore know
the great mantra of Prajnaparamita,
the *mahavidya* mantra,⁹
the unexcelled mantra,
the mantra equal to the unequalled,
which heals all suffering
and is true, not false.
The mantra in Prajnaparamita spoken thus:
Gate, gate, paragate, parasamgate,
bodhi, svaha."¹⁰

Addendum: In the seventh year of Sakyamuni's ministry, the Buddha disappeared during the annual monsoon and reappeared in the Trayastrimsa Heaven at the top of Mount Sumeru, where his mother, Maya, had been reborn as the deva Santusita. The Buddha then spent the entire summer teaching her the Abhidharma, but he returned to Earth every day and gave his disciple Sariputra a summary of what he taught his mother. At the end of the monsoon, the Buddha resumed his career on Earth and never spoke about the Abhidharma again. Meanwhile, Sariputra was said to have compiled what he heard into the first texts that formed the basis of the Abhidharma.

As for Avalokitesvara's presence in this sutra, how could there have been a better choice for offering a critique of Sariputra's

understanding than the Buddha's mother, looking down from above Mount Sumeru? Note, too, that Prajnaparamita is personified as the Mother of Buddhas in the Diamond Sutra. And in the Heart, it is in the magic-lamp-shaped womb of Prajnaparamita that one takes refuge and from which one reappears transformed by the power of her mantra.

THE DIAMOND SUTRA

One: Thus have I heard: Once the Bhagavan was dwelling near Sravasti in the Anathapindada Garden of Jeta Forest together with the full assembly of 1,250 monks.¹

One day before noon, the Bhagavan put on his patched robe, picked up his bowl, and entered the capital of Sravasti for offerings.² After begging for food in the city and eating his meal of rice, he returned from his daily round in the afternoon, put his robe and bowl away, washed his feet, and sat down on his appointed seat. After crossing his legs and adjusting his body, he turned his awareness to what was before him.

A number of monks then came up to where the Bhagavan was sitting. After touching their heads to his feet, they walked around him to the right three times and sat down to one side.

Two: On this occasion, the venerable Subhuti was also present in the assembly.³ Rising from his seat, he uncovered one shoulder and touched his right knee to the ground. Pressing his palms together and bowing to the Buddha, he said: “It is rare, Bhagavan, most rare, indeed, Sugata, how the Tathagata, the Arhan,⁴ the Fully Enlightened One blesses bodhisattvas⁵ with the best of blessings. And it is rare, Bhagavan, how the Tathagata, the Arhan, the Fully Enlightened One entrusts bodhisattvas with the greatest of trusts.⁶

“Even so, Bhagavan, if a noble son or daughter should set forth on the bodhisattva path,⁷ how should they behave, how should they practice, and how should they control their thoughts?”⁸

The Buddha told the venerable Subhuti, “Well said, Subhuti. Well said. So it is, Subhuti. It is as you say. The Tathagata blesses bodhisattvas with the best of blessings and entrusts bodhisattvas with the greatest of trusts. You should therefore truly listen, Subhuti, and ponder this well. I shall tell you how someone who sets forth on

the bodhisattva path should behave, how they should practice, and how they should control their thoughts.”

The venerable Subhuti answered, “May it be so, Bhagavan,” and gave his full attention.

Three: The Buddha said to him, “Subhuti, those who would now set forth on the bodhisattva path should think this thought:⁹ ‘However many beings there are in whatever realms of being might exist, whether they are born from an egg or born from a womb, born from the water or born from the air, whether they have form or no form, whether they are able to perceive or not perceive or neither perceive nor not perceive, in whatever conceivable realm of being one might conceive of beings, in the realm of unconditioned nirvana I shall liberate them all. And though I thus liberate countless beings, not a single being is liberated.’¹⁰

“And why not? Subhuti, a bodhisattva to whom the conception of a being occurs cannot be called a ‘bodhisattva.’ And why is that? Subhuti, no one can be called a bodhisattva who conceives of a being, a life, or a soul.”

Four: “Moreover, Subhuti, when bodhisattvas give a gift, they should not be attached to an object.¹¹ When they give a gift, they should not be attached to anything at all. They should not be attached to a sight when they give a gift. Nor should they be attached to a sound, a smell, a taste, a touch, or a dharma when they give a gift. Thus, Subhuti, bodhisattvas should give a gift without being attached to any idea of its characteristics. And why not? Subhuti, the body of merit of those bodhisattvas who give a gift without being attached isn’t easy to measure.¹² What do you think, Subhuti, is the space to the east easy to measure?”

Subhuti replied, “No, it isn’t, Bhagavan.”

The Buddha said, “Likewise, is the space to the south, to the west, to the north, in between, above, below, or in any of the ten directions easy to measure?”

Subhuti replied, “No, it isn’t, Bhagavan.”

The Buddha said, “In the same way, Subhuti, the body of merit of those bodhisattvas who give a gift without being attached isn’t easy to measure. Thus, Subhuti, those who set forth on the bodhisattva path should give a gift without being attached to any idea of its characteristics.”

Five: “What do you think, Subhuti, can the Tathagata be seen by means of the acquisition of attributes?”¹³

Subhuti replied, “No, Bhagavan, the Tathagata cannot be seen by means of the acquisition of attributes. And why not? Bhagavan, the Tathagata speaks of the acquisition of attributes as the acquisition of no attributes.”¹⁴

The Buddha then told the venerable Subhuti, “Since attributes are a fiction, Subhuti, no attributes would not be a fiction. Hence, by means of attributes that are not attributes the Tathagata can, indeed, be seen.”¹⁵

Six: Hearing this,¹⁶ the venerable Subhuti asked the Buddha, “Bhagavan, will there be beings in the future, in the final epoch, in the final period, in the final five hundred years of the dharma-ending age,¹⁷ who think that the words of a sutra like the one spoken here are true?”

The Buddha said, “Subhuti, do not ask ‘Will there be any beings in the future, in the final epoch, in the final period, in the final five hundred years of the dharma-ending age, who think that the words of a sutra like the one spoken here are true?’ Surely, Subhuti, in the future, in the final epoch, in the final period, in the final five hundred years of the dharma-ending age, there will be fearless bodhisattvas¹⁸ who are capable, virtuous, and wise who think that the words of a sutra like the one spoken here are true.

“Indeed, Subhuti, such bodhisattvas will have honored not just one buddha or planted auspicious roots before not just one buddha. Surely, Subhuti, such bodhisattvas will have honored countless hundreds and thousands of buddhas and planted auspicious roots before countless hundreds and thousands of buddhas.¹⁹ In the words of a sutra like the one spoken here, they are sure to gain a

single-minded confidence.²⁰ The Tathagata knows them, Subhuti. And the Tathagata sees them, Subhuti. For they all produce and obtain a limitless, infinite body of merit.²¹

“And how so? Because, Subhuti, the idea of a self does not occur to such bodhisattvas, neither does the idea of a being, a life, or a soul. Nor, Subhuti, does the idea of a dharma occur to such bodhisattvas, much less no dharma. Neither an idea occurs to them, Subhuti, nor no idea.

“And why not? Because, Subhuti, if the idea of a dharma occurred to these bodhisattvas, they would be attached to a self, a being, a life, or a soul. Likewise, if the idea of no dharma occurred to them, they would be attached to a self, a being, a life, or a soul.

“And how so? Because, Subhuti, bodhisattvas are not attached to a dharma, much less to no dharma. This is the meaning behind the Tathagata’s saying, ‘The teaching of a dharma is like a raft. If you should let go of dharmas, how much more so no dharmas.’”²²

Seven: The Buddha then asked the venerable Subhuti, “What do you think, Subhuti? Did the Tathagata realize any such dharma as ‘unexcelled, perfect enlightenment’? Or does the Tathagata teach any such dharma?”²³

The venerable Subhuti answered, “Bhagavan, as I understand the meaning of what the Buddha has said, the Tathagata did not realize any such dharma as ‘unexcelled, perfect enlightenment.’ Nor does the Tathagata teach such a dharma. And why not? Because this dharma realized and taught by the Tathagata is ungraspable and inexpressible and is neither a dharma nor no dharma. And why is this? Because sages arise from what is unconditioned.”²⁴

Eight: The Buddha said, “Subhuti, what do you think? If some noble son or daughter covered the billion worlds of this universe with the seven treasures²⁵ and gave them as a gift to the tathagatas, the arhans, the fully enlightened ones, would the body of merit produced as a result by this noble son or daughter be great?”

Subhuti answered, “It would be great, Bhagavan. The body of merit produced as a result by that noble son or daughter would be

great, Sugata. And how so? Bhagavan, what the Tathagata has said is a body of merit, the Tathagata has said is no body. Thus does the Tathagata speak of a body of merit as a 'body of merit.'"²⁶

The Buddha said, "Subhuti, if instead of covering the billion worlds of this universe with the seven treasures and giving them as a gift to the tathagatas, the arhans, the fully enlightened ones, this noble son or daughter took but one four-line verse²⁷ of this teaching and made it known and explained it in detail to others, the body of merit produced as a result would be immeasurably, infinitely greater. And how so? Subhuti, from this is born the unexcelled, perfect enlightenment of tathagatas, arhans, and fully enlightened ones. From this are born buddhas and bhagavans.²⁸ And how so? The dharmas of a buddha, Subhuti, the dharmas of a buddha are spoken of by the Tathagata as no dharmas of a buddha. Thus does he speak of the 'dharmas of a buddha.'"²⁹

Nine: "What do you think, Subhuti, does it occur to those who enter the river, 'I have attained the goal of entering the river'?"³⁰

Subhuti replied, "No, indeed, Bhagavan. It does not occur to those who enter the river, 'I have attained the goal of entering the river.' And why not? Bhagavan, they do not enter any such dharma. Thus are they said to 'enter the river.' They do not enter a sight, nor do they enter a sound, a smell, a taste, a touch, or a dharma. Thus are they said to 'enter the river.'"

The Buddha said, "What do you think, Subhuti, does it occur to those who return once more, 'I have attained the goal of returning once more'?"

Subhuti replied, "No, indeed, Bhagavan. It does not occur to those who return once more, 'I have attained the goal of returning once more.' And why not? Bhagavan, they do not attain any such dharma as 'returning once more.' Thus are they said to 'return once more.'"

The Buddha said, "What do you think, Subhuti, does it occur to those who return no more, 'I have attained the goal of returning no more'?"

Subhuti replied, “No, indeed, Bhagavan. And why not? Bhagavan, they do not attain any such dharma as ‘returning no more.’ Thus are they said to ‘return no more.’”

The Buddha said, “What do you think, Subhuti, does it occur to those who become free from rebirth, ‘I have attained the goal of freedom from rebirth’?”³¹

Subhuti replied, “No, indeed, Bhagavan. And why not? Bhagavan, there is no such dharma as ‘freedom from rebirth.’ Thus are they said to become ‘free from rebirth.’ If, Bhagavan, it should occur to those who become free from rebirth, ‘I have attained the goal of freedom from rebirth,’ attachment to a self would occur, or attachment to a being, attachment to a life, attachment to a soul would occur.

“And how so? Bhagavan, the Tathagata, the Arhan, the Fully Enlightened One has declared that I am foremost among those who dwell free of passion. Though I am free from rebirth and without desires, Bhagavan, I do not think, ‘I am free from rebirth and without desires.’ Bhagavan, if I thought, ‘I have attained the goal of freedom from rebirth,’ the Tathagata would not have singled me out by saying, ‘Foremost among those who dwell free of passion is the noble son Subhuti. For he dwells nowhere at all. Thus is he said to be one who dwells free of passion who “dwells free of passion.”’”³²

Ten: The Buddha said, “Subhuti, what do you think? Did the Tathagata attain any such dharma in the presence of Dipamkara Tathagata, the Arhan, the Fully Enlightened One?”³³

Subhuti replied, “No, indeed, Bhagavan. The Tathagata did not attain any such dharma in the presence of Dipamkara Tathagata, the Arhan, the Fully Enlightened One.”

The Buddha said, “Subhuti, if any bodhisattva should thus claim, ‘I shall bring about a transformation of the world,’³⁴ their claim would be untrue. And how so? A transformation of the world, Subhuti, a ‘transformation of the world’ is said by the Tathagata to be no transformation. Thus does he speak of a ‘transformation of the world.’

“Therefore, Subhuti, a bodhisattva’s thoughts should not be attached to anything.³⁵ Their thoughts should not be attached to a sight, nor should their thoughts be attached to a sound, a smell, a taste, a touch, or a dharma.

“Subhuti, imagine a person³⁶ with an immense, perfect body³⁷ whose bodily existence is like that of Mount Sumeru.³⁸ What do you think, Subhuti? Would such bodily existence be great?”³⁹

Subhuti replied, “It would be great, Bhagavan. Such bodily existence would be great, Sugata. And why? Because bodily existence, Bhagavan, bodily existence is said by the Tathagata to be no existence. Thus does he speak of ‘bodily existence.’”

Eleven: The Buddha said, “Subhuti, what do you think? If there were as many rivers as there are grains of sand in the river of the Ganges, would the number of grains of sand in all those rivers be great?”

Subhuti replied, “The number of rivers would be great, Bhagavan, how much more so their grains of sand.”

The Buddha said, “I shall tell you, Subhuti, so you shall know. If a man or woman covered as many worlds as there are grains of sand in all those rivers with the seven treasures and gave them as a gift to the tathagatas, the arhans, the fully enlightened ones, what do you think, Subhuti, would the body of merit produced as a result by that man or woman be great?”

Subhuti replied, “It would be great, Bhagavan, great, indeed, Sugata. The body of merit produced as a result by that man or woman would be great.”

The Buddha said, “Subhuti, if instead of giving the gift of all those worlds covered with the seven treasures, a noble son or daughter grasped but one four-line verse of this teaching and made it known and explained it to others, the body of merit produced as a result would be immeasurably, infinitely greater.”⁴⁰

Twelve: “Furthermore, Subhuti, in the world of devas, humans, and asuras, wherever a single four-line verse of this teaching is spoken or explained, that place shall become a sanctuary.⁴¹ How much more so, Subhuti, if someone memorizes, recites, and masters this

entire teaching and explains it in detail to others. For in that place, Subhuti, dwells a teacher or someone who represents a teacher.”

Thirteen: Upon hearing these words, the venerable Subhuti asked, “Bhagavan, what is the name of this teaching, and how should we remember it?”

The Buddha told the venerable Subhuti, “The name of this teaching, Subhuti, is the Prajnaparamita.⁴² Thus should you remember it. And how so? Subhuti, what the Tathagata says is the perfection of wisdom, the Tathagata says is no perfection.

“Subhuti, what do you think? Is there any such dharma spoken by the Tathagata?”

Subhuti said, “No, indeed, Bhagavan. There is no such dharma spoken by the Tathagata.”

The Buddha said, “Subhuti, what do you think? Are there many specks of dust in the billion-world system of a universe?”

Subhuti said, “Many, Bhagavan, there are many specks of dust, Sugata. And how so? Because, Bhagavan, what the Tathagata says is a speck of dust, Bhagavan, the Tathagata says is no speck. Thus does he speak of a ‘speck of dust.’ And what the Tathagata says is a world-system, the Tathagata says is no system. Thus does he speak of a ‘world-system.’”

The Buddha said, “Subhuti, what do you think? Can the Tathagata, the Arhan, the Fully Enlightened One be seen by means of the thirty-two attributes of a perfected person?”⁴³

Subhuti said, “No, indeed, Bhagavan. The Tathagata, the Arhan, the Fully Enlightened One cannot be seen by means of the thirty-two attributes of a perfected person. And why not? Because, Bhagavan, what the Tathagata says are the thirty-two attributes of a perfected person, Bhagavan, the Tathagata says are no attributes.⁴⁴ Thus does he speak of the ‘thirty-two attributes of a perfected person.’”

The Buddha said, “Furthermore, Subhuti, if a man or woman were to sacrifice their bodily existence every day as many times as there are grains of sand in the Ganges, and someone were to grasp but one four-line verse of this teaching and make it known and

explain it to others, the body of merit produced as a result would be immeasurably, infinitely greater.”⁴⁵

Fourteen: By the force of this teaching, the venerable Subhuti was moved to tears. Wiping his eyes, he said to the Buddha, “How remarkable, Bhagavan, how remarkable, Sugata, is this teaching the Bhagavan speaks for the benefit of those who seek the foremost of paths, for the benefit of those who seek the best of paths. Ever since I became aware, Bhagavan, I have not heard a teaching such as this! They shall be the most wonderfully blessed of bodhisattvas, Bhagavan, who hear what is said in this sutra and think it is true. And how so? Bhagavan, the idea it is true is no idea it is true. Thus does the Tathagata speak of an idea it is true as an ‘idea it is true.’

“Hearing such a teaching, Bhagavan, it isn’t remarkable that I should believe it to be true. But in the future, Bhagavan, in the final epoch, in the final period, in the final five hundred years of the dharma-ending age, Bhagavan, those beings who grasp this teaching and memorize it, recite it, master it, and explain it in detail to others, they shall be most remarkably blessed. And yet, Bhagavan, the idea of a self will not occur to them, nor shall the idea of a being, the idea of a life, or the idea of a soul occur to them. Neither an idea nor no idea will occur to them. And why not? Bhagavan, the idea of a self is no idea, and likewise the idea of a being, a life, or a soul is no idea. And how so? Because buddhas and bhagavans are free from all ideas.”

This having been said, the Buddha told the venerable Subhuti, “So it is, Subhuti. So it is. Those beings shall be most remarkably blessed, Subhuti, who are not alarmed, not frightened, and not distressed by what is said in this sutra. And how so? Subhuti, what the Tathagata proclaims as the best of perfections is no perfection. Moreover, Subhuti, what the Tathagata proclaims as the best of perfections is also proclaimed by countless buddhas and bhagavans. Thus is it called the ‘best of perfections.’

“So, too, Subhuti, is the Tathagata’s perfection of acceptance⁴⁶ no perfection. And how so? Subhuti, when King Kali cut off my limbs, my ears, my nose, and my flesh, at that moment neither the thought

of a self, a being, a life, nor a soul existed.⁴⁷ There was neither a thought nor no thought. And why not? At that moment, Subhuti, if there had been the thought of a self, at that moment there would have also been the thought of ill will. Or if there had been the thought of a being, the thought of a life, or the thought of a soul, at that moment there would have been the thought of ill will. And why wasn't there? Subhuti, during my five hundred lifetimes as the mendicant Ksanti, during that time there was no thought of a self. Nor was there the thought of a being, the thought of a life, or the thought of a soul.

"Therefore, Subhuti, bodhisattvas should abandon all thoughts in thinking about unexcelled, perfect enlightenment. Their thoughts should not be attached to a form, nor should they be attached to a sound, a smell, a taste, a touch, or a dharma. Neither should their thoughts be attached to a dharma, nor should they be attached to no dharma. Their thoughts should not be attached to anything. And why not? Every attachment is no attachment. Thus does the Tathagata say that bodhisattvas should give a gift without being attached.

"Moreover, Subhuti, bodhisattvas should practice charity in this manner for the benefit of all beings.⁴⁸ And how so? Subhuti, the thought of a being is no thought. Thus are all the beings of whom the Tathagata speaks no beings. And how so? Subhuti, what the Tathagata says is so. What the Tathagata says is true. The Tathagata does not speak otherwise. Nor does the Tathagata speak falsely. Indeed, Subhuti, in the dharma realized and taught by the Tathagata, there is nothing true and nothing untrue.

"Subhuti, a bodhisattva who practices charity captivated by objects is like someone who enters a dark place and can't see a thing, while a bodhisattva who practices charity not captivated by objects is like a person with eyes at the end of the night when the sun shines forth who can see all manner of things.

"Furthermore, Subhuti, if a noble son or daughter should grasp this teaching and memorize it, recite it, master it, and explain it in detail to others, by means of his buddha knowledge the Tathagata will know them, the Tathagata will see them and will be aware of them, Subhuti, for all such beings as this produce and acquire an immeasurable, infinite body of merit."⁴⁹

Fifteen: “Furthermore, Subhuti, if a man or woman sacrificed their bodily existence during the morning as many times as there are grains of sand in the Ganges, and they likewise sacrificed their bodily existence during midday as many times as there are grains of sand in the Ganges, and they sacrificed their bodily existence during the afternoon as many times as there are grains of sand in the Ganges, and they sacrificed their bodily existence in this manner for hundreds and thousands of millions and trillions of kalpas, and someone heard this teaching and did not reject it, the body of merit produced as a result would be immeasurably, infinitely greater. How much more so if they wrote it down and studied it, memorized it, recited it, mastered it, and explained it in detail to others.⁵⁰

“Furthermore, Subhuti, inconceivable and incomparable is this teaching, this teaching spoken by the Tathagata, Subhuti, for the benefit of those who set forth on the foremost of paths, for the benefit of those who set forth on the best of paths. For if someone grasps, memorizes, recites, and masters this teaching and explains it in detail to others, the Tathagata will know them, Subhuti. The Tathagata will see them, Subhuti. For all such beings produce a body of merit that has no limits, a body of merit that is inconceivable and incomparable, immeasurable and boundless. For all such beings, Subhuti, wear the same enlightenment upon their shoulders.⁵¹ And how so? Subhuti, this teaching cannot be heard, recited, mastered, or explained by beings of lesser aspiration: not by those who imagine a self, nor by those who imagine a being, a life, or a soul. That would be impossible.

“Moreover, Subhuti, wherever this sutra is explained, that place shall be worthy of worship. Whether in the realm of devas, humans, or asuras, that place shall be honored with prostrations and circumambulations. That place shall be a sanctuary.”

Sixteen: “Nevertheless, Subhuti, the noble son or daughter who grasps, memorizes, recites, and masters such a sutra as this and contemplates it thoroughly and explains it in detail to others might suffer their contempt, their utter contempt. And why so? Subhuti, the bad karma created by them in past lives should result in an unfortunate rebirth. But now, by suffering such contempt, they put an

end to the bad karma of their past lives and attain the enlightenment of buddhas.

“Subhuti, I recall in the past, during the countless, infinite kalpas prior to Dipamkara Tathagata, the Arhan, the Fully Enlightened One, I served eighty-four hundred, thousand, million, trillion other buddhas and served them without fail. Nevertheless, Subhuti, though I served those buddhas and bhagavans and served them without fail, in the future, in the final epoch, in the final period, in the final five hundred years of the dharma-ending age, the body of merit of the person who grasps, memorizes, recites, and masters such a sutra as this, and explains it in detail to others will exceed my former body of merit not by a hundredfold or a thousandfold or a hundred thousandfold or a millionfold or a hundred millionfold or a thousand millionfold or a hundred-thousand millionfold, but by an amount that cannot be measured, calculated, illustrated, characterized, or even imagined. Subhuti, were I to describe this noble son or daughter’s body of merit, the full extent of the body of merit this noble son or daughter would thereby produce and acquire, it would bewilder and confuse people’s minds. Inconceivable, Subhuti, is this teaching spoken by the Tathagata, and inconceivable is the result you should expect.”

Seventeen: Again, the venerable Subhuti asked the Buddha, “Bhagavan, if someone sets forth on the bodhisattva path, how should they behave? How should they practice? And how should they control their thoughts?”

The Buddha said, “Subhuti, someone who sets forth on the bodhisattva path should think this thought: ‘In the realm of unconditional nirvana, I shall liberate all beings. And while I thus liberate beings, not a single being is liberated.’ And how so? Subhuti, if the thought of a being occurs to a bodhisattva, they cannot be called a ‘bodhisattva.’ Neither can someone to whom the thought of a life or the thought of a soul occurs be called a ‘bodhisattva.’ And why not? Subhuti, there is no such dharma as ‘setting forth on the bodhisattva path.’⁵²

“What do you think, Subhuti? When the Tathagata was with Dipamkara Tathagata, did he realize any such dharma as unexcelled, perfect enlightenment?”

To this the venerable Subhuti answered, “Bhagavan, as I understand the meaning of what the Tathagata has taught, when the Tathagata was with Dipamkara Tathagata, the Arhan, the Fully Enlightened One, he did not realize any such dharma as unexcelled, perfect enlightenment.”

To this the Buddha replied, “So it is, Subhuti. So it is. When the Tathagata was with Dipamkara Tathagata, the Arhan, the Fully Enlightened One, he did not realize any such dharma as unexcelled, perfect enlightenment. Moreover, Subhuti, if the Tathagata had realized any such dharma, Dipamkara Tathagata would not have prophesied, ‘Young man, in the future you shall become the tathagata, the arhan, the fully enlightened one named Sakyamuni.’ Subhuti, it was because the Tathagata, the Arhan, the Fully Enlightened One did not realize any such dharma as unexcelled, perfect enlightenment, that Dipamkara Tathagata prophesied, ‘Young man, in the future you shall become the tathagata, the arhan, the fully enlightened one named Sakyamuni.’ And how so? ‘Tathagata,’ Subhuti, is another name for what is truly so.

“Subhuti, if anyone should claim, ‘The Tathagata, the Arhan, the Fully Enlightened One realized unexcelled, perfect enlightenment,’ their claim would be untrue. Subhuti, they would be making a false statement about me. And how so? Subhuti, the Tathagata did not realize any such dharma as unexcelled, perfect enlightenment. Furthermore, Subhuti, in the dharma realized and taught by the Tathagata there is nothing true or untrue. Thus does the Tathagata say ‘all dharmas of the buddhas are dharmas of the buddhas.’ And how so? ‘All dharmas,’ Subhuti, are said by the Tathagata to be no dharmas. Thus, are all dharmas called ‘dharmas of the buddhas.’

“Subhuti, imagine a perfected person with an immense, perfect body.”⁵³

The venerable Subhuti said, “Bhagavan, this perfected person who the Tathagata says has an ‘immense, perfect body,’ Bhagavan, the Tathagata says has no body. Thus is it called an ‘immense, perfect body.’”

The Buddha said, “So it is, Subhuti. If a bodhisattva says, ‘I shall liberate beings,’ they are not called a ‘bodhisattva.’ And why not? Subhuti, is there any such dharma as a ‘bodhisattva’?”

Subhuti replied, “No, indeed, Bhagavan. There is no such dharma as a ‘bodhisattva.’”

The Buddha said, “And beings, Subhuti, ‘beings,’ are said by the Tathagata to be no beings. Thus are they called ‘beings.’ And thus does the Tathagata say ‘all dharmas are without a self, all dharmas are without a life, an individuality, or a soul.’⁵⁴

“Subhuti, if a bodhisattva should claim, ‘I shall bring about a transformation of the world,’ their claim would be untrue. And how so? A transformation of the world, Subhuti, a ‘transformation of the world’ is said by the Tathagata to be no transformation. Thus is it called a ‘transformation of the world.’⁵⁵

“Subhuti, when a bodhisattva believes and understands dharmas that have no self are dharmas that have no self, the Tathagata, the Arhan, the Fully Enlightened One pronounces that person a fearless bodhisattva indeed.”

Eighteen: The Buddha said, “Subhuti, what do you think? Does the Tathagata possess a physical eye?”

Subhuti replied, “So he does, Bhagavan. The Tathagata possesses a physical eye.”

The Buddha said, “Subhuti, what do you think? Does the Tathagata possess a divine eye?”

Subhuti replied, “So he does, Bhagavan. The Tathagata possesses a divine eye.”

The Buddha said, “Subhuti, what do you think? Does the Tathagata possess a prajna eye?”

Subhuti replied, “So he does, Bhagavan. The Tathagata possesses a prajna eye.”

The Buddha said, “Subhuti, what do you think? Does the Tathagata possess a dharma eye?”

Subhuti replied, “So he does, Bhagavan. The Tathagata possesses a dharma eye.”

The Buddha said, “Subhuti, what do you think? Does the Tathagata possess a buddha eye?”

Subhuti replied, “So he does, Bhagavan. The Tathagata possesses a buddha eye.”

The Buddha said, “Subhuti, what do you think? As many grains of sand as there are in the great river of the Ganges, does the Tathagata not speak of them as grains of sand?”

Subhuti replied, “So he does, Bhagavan. So he does, Sugata. The Tathagata speaks of them as grains of sand.”

The Buddha said, “What do you think, Subhuti? If there were as many rivers as all the grains of sand in the great river of the Ganges and as many worlds as there are grains of sand in all these rivers, would there be many worlds?”

Subhuti replied, “So there would, Bhagavan. So there would, Sugata. There would be many worlds.”

The Buddha said, “And as many beings as there might be in those worlds, Subhuti, I would know their myriad streams of thought. And how so? Streams of thought, Subhuti, what the Tathagata speaks of as ‘streams of thought’ are no streams. Thus are they called ‘streams of thought.’⁵⁶ And how so? Subhuti, a past thought cannot be found. A future thought cannot be found. Nor can a present thought be found.”

Nineteen: “Subhuti, what do you think? If some noble son or daughter covered the billion worlds of this universe with the seven treasures and gave them all as a gift to the tathagatas, the arhans, the fully enlightened ones, would the body of merit produced as a result by that noble son or daughter be great?”

Subhuti replied, “It would be great, Bhagavan. It would be great, indeed, Sugata.”

The Buddha said, “So it would, Subhuti. So it would. The body of merit produced as a result by that noble son or daughter would be immeasurably, infinitely great. And how so? Subhuti, if there were a body of merit, the Tathagata would not have spoken of a body of merit as a ‘body of merit.’”⁵⁷

Twenty: “Subhuti, what do you think? Can the Tathagata be seen by means of the perfection of a physical body?”

Subhuti replied, “No, indeed, Bhagavan. The Tathagata cannot be seen by means of the perfection of a physical body. And why not?”

The perfection of a physical body, Bhagavan, the ‘perfection of a physical body’ is spoken of by the Tathagata as no perfection. Thus does he speak of the ‘perfection of a physical body.’”

The Buddha said, “Subhuti, what do you think? Can the Tathagata be seen by means of the acquisition of attributes?”

Subhuti replied, “No, indeed, Bhagavan. The Tathagata cannot be seen by means of the acquisition of attributes. And why not? Bhagavan, what the Tathagata speaks of as the acquisition of attributes is spoken of by the Tathagata as no acquisition of attributes. Thus does he speak of the ‘acquisition of attributes.’”⁵⁸

Twenty-one: The Buddha said, “Subhuti, what do you think? Does it occur to the Tathagata: ‘I teach a dharma’? Subhuti, if someone should claim the Tathagata teaches a dharma, their claim would be untrue. Such a view of me, Subhuti, would be a misconception. And how so? In the teaching of a dharma, Subhuti, in the ‘teaching of a dharma,’ there is no such dharma to be found as the ‘teaching of a dharma.’”

Upon hearing these words, the venerable Subhuti asked the Buddha, “Bhagavan, will there be any beings in the future, in the final epoch, in the final period, in the final five hundred years of the dharma-ending age, who hear a dharma such as this and believe it?”

The Buddha said, “Neither beings, Subhuti, nor no beings. And how so? ‘Beings,’ Subhuti, all beings are spoken of by the Tathagata, Subhuti, as no beings. Thus does he speak of ‘beings.’”⁵⁹

Twenty-two: “Subhuti, what do you think? Did the Tathagata realize any such dharma as unexcelled, perfect enlightenment?”

The venerable Subhuti replied, “No, indeed, Bhagavan. The Tathagata did not realize any such dharma, Bhagavan, as unexcelled, perfect enlightenment.”

The Buddha said, “So it is, Subhuti. So it is. The slightest dharma neither exists nor is found therein. Thus is it called ‘unexcelled, perfect enlightenment.’”⁶⁰

Twenty-three: “Furthermore, Subhuti, there is nothing in this dharma that is different or not the same. Thus is it called ‘unexcelled, perfect enlightenment.’ Without a self, without a being, without a life, without a soul, without any difference, this unexcelled, perfect enlightenment is realized by means of all auspicious dharmas. And how so? Auspicious dharmas, Subhuti, ‘auspicious dharmas’ are spoken of by the Tathagata as no dharmas. Thus does he speak of ‘auspicious dharmas.’”⁶¹

Twenty-four: “Moreover, Subhuti, if a man or woman brought together as many piles of the seven treasures as all the Mount Sumerus in the billion worlds of the universe and gave them as a gift to the tathagatas, the arhans, the fully enlightened ones, and a noble son or daughter took but a single four-line verse of this teaching of Prajnaparamita and made it known to others, Subhuti, their body of merit would be greater by more than a hundredfold, indeed, by an amount beyond comparison.”

Twenty-five: “Subhuti, what do you think? Does it occur to the Tathagata: ‘I liberate beings’? Surely, Subhuti, you should hold no such view. And why not? Subhuti, the being does not exist who is liberated by the Tathagata. Subhuti, if any being were liberated by the Tathagata, the Tathagata would be attached to a self. He would be attached to a being, attached to a life, or attached to a soul. Attachment to a self, Subhuti, is said by the Tathagata to be no attachment. Yet foolish people remain attached. And foolish people, Subhuti, are said by the Tathagata to be no people. Thus does he speak of ‘foolish people.’”⁶²

Twenty-six: “Subhuti, what do you think? Can the Tathagata be seen by means of the acquisition of attributes?”

Subhuti replied, “No, indeed, Bhagavan. As I understand the meaning of what the Buddha says, the Tathagata cannot be seen by means of the acquisition of attributes.”

The Buddha said, “Well done, Subhuti. Well done. So it is, Subhuti. It is as you claim. The Tathagata cannot be seen by means

of the acquisition of attributes. And why not? Subhuti, if the Tathagata could be seen by means of the acquisition of attributes, a universal king would be a tathagata. Hence, the Tathagata cannot be seen by means of the acquisition of attributes.”⁶³

The Buddha then spoke two verses:

“Who looks for me in form
who seeks me in a voice
indulges in wasted effort
such people see me not”⁶⁴

A buddha is seen by means of the Dharma
the Dharma is the teacher’s body
the Dharma itself isn’t known
nor can it be known.”⁶⁵

Twenty-seven: “Subhuti, what do you think? Was it due to the acquisition of attributes that the Tathagata realized unexcelled, perfect enlightenment? Subhuti, you should hold no such view. And why not? Subhuti, it could not have been due to the acquisition of attributes that the Tathagata realized unexcelled, perfect enlightenment.”⁶⁶

“Furthermore, Subhuti, someone may claim ‘those who set forth on the bodhisattva path announce the destruction or end of some dharma.’ Subhuti, you should hold no such view. And why not? Those who set forth on the bodhisattva path do not announce the destruction or end of any dharma.”⁶⁷

Twenty-eight: “Furthermore, Subhuti, if a noble son or daughter took as many worlds as there are grains of sand in the Ganges and covered them with the seven treasures and gave them as a gift to the tathagatas, to the arhans, to the fully enlightened ones, and a bodhisattva gained an acceptance of the selfless, birthless nature of dharmas, the body of merit produced as a result would be immeasurably, infinitely greater. And yet, Subhuti, this fearless bodhisattva would not acquire a body of merit.”

The venerable Subhuti said, “But surely, Bhagavan, this bodhisattva would acquire a body of merit!”

The Buddha replied, “They would, Subhuti, but without becoming attached to it. Thus do I speak of ‘acquiring.’”

Twenty-nine: “Furthermore, Subhuti, if anyone should claim that the Tathagata goes or comes or stands or sits or lies down, Subhuti, they do not understand the meaning of my words. And why not? Subhuti, those who are called ‘tathagatas’ do not go anywhere, nor do they come from anywhere. Thus are they called ‘tathagatas, arhans, and fully enlightened ones.’”⁶⁸

Thirty: “Furthermore, Subhuti, if a noble son or daughter took as many worlds as there are specks of dust in a billion-world universe and by an expenditure of limitless energy ground them into atoms, Subhuti, what do you think, would there be a great pile of atoms?”⁶⁹

Subhuti replied, “So there would, Bhagavan. So there would, Sugata. There would be a great pile of atoms. And how so? If a great pile of atoms existed, Bhagavan, the Tathagata would not have spoken of a ‘pile of atoms.’”⁷⁰ And why not? Bhagavan, this pile of atoms of which the Tathagata speaks is said by the Tathagata to be no pile. Thus does he speak of a ‘pile of atoms.’ Also, Bhagavan, this billion-world universe of which the Tathagata speaks is said by the Tathagata to be no universe. Thus does he speak of a ‘billion-world universe.’ And how so? Bhagavan, if a universe existed, an attachment to an entity would exist.⁷¹ But whenever the Tathagata speaks of an attachment to an entity, the Tathagata speaks of it as no attachment. Thus does he speak of an ‘attachment to an entity.’”⁷²

The Buddha said, “Subhuti, an attachment to an entity is nonsensical and inexplicable. Yet foolish people are attached.”

Thirty-one: “And how so? Subhuti, if someone should claim that the Tathagata speaks of a view of a self, or that the Tathagata speaks of a view of a being, a view of a life, or a view of a soul, would such a claim be true, Subhuti?”

Subhuti said, “No, Bhagavan. No, indeed, Sugata. Such a claim would not be true. And why not? Bhagavan, when the Tathagata speaks of a view of a self, the Tathagata speaks of it as no view. Thus does he speak of a ‘view of a self.’”

The Buddha said, “Indeed, Subhuti, so it is. Those who set forth on the bodhisattva path should know, view, believe, and understand all dharmas but do so without being attached to the idea of a dharma. And why not? The idea of a dharma, Subhuti, the ‘idea of a dharma’ is said by the Tathagata to be no idea. Thus does he speak of the ‘idea of a dharma.’”

Thirty-two: “Furthermore, Subhuti, if a fearless bodhisattva covered measureless, infinite worlds with the seven treasures and gave them as an offering, and a noble son or daughter took but a single four-line verse of this teaching of Prajnaparamita and memorized it, made it known, recited it, mastered it, and explained it in detail to others, the body of merit produced as a result by that noble son or daughter would be immeasurably, infinitely greater. And how should they explain it? By not explaining. Thus should they explain it.

As a lamp, a cataract, a shooting star
an illusion, a dewdrop, a bubble
a dream, a cloud, a flash of lightning
view all created things like this.”

All this was spoken by the Buddha to the delight of the elder Subhuti. The monks and nuns, the laymen and laywomen, and all the devas, humans, asuras, and gandharvas of the world were also greatly pleased with what the Buddha said.

THE PLATFORM SUTRA

One: Master Huineng took his seat in the lecture hall of Dafan Temple 大梵寺¹ to expound the teaching of Maha Prajnaparamita² and to transmit the Formless Precepts.³ Seated below him on that occasion were over ten thousand monks and nuns and laypeople, as well as Magistrate Wei Qu 韋璩 of Shaozhou and more than sixty officials and scholars, all of whom had asked the Master to explain the Maha Prajnaparamita. The Magistrate also instructed the Master's disciple, Fahai, to make a record to pass down to future generations so that students of the Way who upheld its guiding principle and who transmitted it to others would have this testament to rely on as their authority.

Two: Master Huineng began this Platform Sutra by saying, "Good friends, clear your minds by reflecting on the teaching of Maha Prajnaparamita." The Master then stopped speaking while he cleared his own mind.

After a long time, he spoke again, "Good friends, please listen. My kind-hearted father was from Fanyang 范陽,⁴ but he was dismissed from office and banished to Lingnan 嶺南.⁵ He lived in Xinzhou 新州 as a commoner and died when I was quite young. My widowed mother then moved to Nanhai 南海,⁶ and since we were poor, I sold firewood at the market.

"One day a shopkeeper happened to buy a load from me and asked me to bring it to his store. After he took delivery and paid me, I met a customer on my way out the door who was reading the Diamond Sutra out loud. As soon as I heard the words, my mind felt clear and awake. I asked him, 'Where did you get that scripture?'

"He said, 'On East Fengmu Mountain 東馮墓山 in Huangmei County 黃梅縣.⁷ I went there to pay my respects to the Fifth Patriarch, Master Hongren 弘忍. His congregation includes more than a thousand disciples, and while I was there, I heard him tell the monks and laypeople that by memorizing just a single section of the

Diamond Sutra they would see their natures and immediately understand how to become buddhas.'

"When I heard this, I sensed a connection from a past life. I said goodbye to my mother and left for Huangmei's Fengmu Mountain to pay my respects to Master Hongren."⁸

Three: "Master Hongren asked me, 'Where are you from? And what do you hope to accomplish by coming to this mountain to pay your respects?'

"I answered, 'Your disciple is from Lingnan, a commoner of Xinzhou. The reason I came all this way to pay my respects is for just one thing: to become a buddha.'

"The Master scoffed, 'But you're from Lingnan and a jungle dog at that.'⁹ How can you possibly become a buddha?'

"I replied, 'People might be from the north or south, but not their buddha nature.'¹⁰ The bodies of this jungle dog and the Master aren't the same, but how can our buddha natures differ?'

"The Master was about to say something to me. But seeing his attendants standing there, he didn't say anything more and sent me to join the monastery workforce. A novice then led me to the milling room, where I pedaled a millstone for the next eight months."

Four: "One day, the Fifth Patriarch suddenly called his disciples together. After they had assembled, he said, 'I've told you that the greatest concern for anyone is life and death. But you disciples spend your days making offerings, looking for ways to earn blessings, not for a way out of the bitter sea of life and death. If you are blind to your own nature, how can you find the gate to blessings? Go back to your rooms and look within yourselves. Those of you who are sufficiently wise, use the prajna wisdom of your own nature and write me a poem. When I read your poems, if any of you understands what is truly important, I will give you the robe and the Dharma'¹¹ and will appoint you the Sixth Patriarch. Hurry, as if there were a fire!'"

Five: “Once his disciples received these instructions, as they returned to their rooms,¹² they said to one another, ‘There’s no need for us to clear our minds and go to the trouble of writing a poem to show the abbot. Venerable Shenxiu 神秀 is our precept instructor.¹³ After he receives the Dharma, we can look to him. There’s no need to write a poem.’ So they stopped worrying about it, and no one was willing to submit one.

“It happened that there was a corridor in front of the Patriarch’s Hall. Because people left offerings at the foot of the wall, the abbot wanted to cover it with murals from the Lankavatara Sutra¹⁴ and paintings of the five patriarchs transmitting the robe and the Dharma so that it would serve as a record to be passed down to future generations. The painter Lu Zhen 盧珍 had inspected the wall and was going to begin work the next day.”

Six: “The venerable Shenxiu thought, ‘Because I am their precept instructor, no one is going to submit a poem. But if I don’t submit one, how can the Patriarch tell whether the understanding of my mind is deep or not? To show the Patriarch a poem because I want the Dharma would be the right thing to do. But if it was for the patriarchship, it would be wrong. I would be the same as a simpleminded person usurping the position of a sage. Still, if I don’t submit a poem, I will never receive the Dharma.’ As he considered this, he kept thinking, ‘What a predicament!’

“Finally, at midnight, not letting anyone see him, he went to write his poem on the south corridor wall in hopes of obtaining the robe and the Dharma. He thought, ‘When the Patriarch sees my poem and reads it, if he comes to find me, the moment I see him, I’ll tell him I wrote it. But when he sees it, if he says it isn’t good enough, it will be due to the obstruction of my past karma that I don’t understand and am not ready to receive the Dharma. The Master’s mind is impossible to fathom. I may as well stop worrying.’ So the venerable Shenxiu held up a lantern and wrote his poem on the wall of the south corridor at midnight without anyone seeing him. His poem went:

‘Our body is a bodhi tree

the mind is like a propped-up mirror¹⁵
always keep it polished
don't let it gather dust.”

Seven: “After Shenxiu wrote his poem, he returned to his room unseen and lay down. At dawn, the Fifth Patriarch sent for the court artist, Lu Zhen, to come to the south corridor to paint scenes from the Lankavatara. The Fifth Patriarch suddenly saw the poem. After he read it, he told Lu, ‘You’ve gone to so much trouble and come so far, we will pay you thirty thousand coins,’¹⁶ but there is no need to paint any murals. The Diamond Sutra says, “Attributes are a fiction.”¹⁷ It would be better if we kept this poem for deluded people to recite. Anyone who relies on this for their practice won’t fall into any of the three unfortunate states of existence. And it will be a great help to anyone who cultivates the Dharma.’

“The Master then called his disciples together and burned incense before the poem. When everyone saw this, they were filled with respect. The Master said, ‘Any of you who recites and understands this poem will see their nature. And anyone who relies on this for their practice won’t descend into a lesser state of existence.’ As his disciples recited it, they all did so with reverence and exclaimed how wonderful it was.

“Later, the Fifth Patriarch called Shenxiu to his room and asked, ‘Did you write the poem? If you did, you’re ready to receive my Dharma.’

“Shenxiu said, ‘I’m guilty. It’s true. I was the one who wrote it. But I don’t dare ask for the patriarchship, only for the Master’s judgment as to whether your disciple has acquired enough wisdom to understand what is truly important or not.’

“The Fifth Patriarch said, ‘This poem of yours shows your understanding has reached the threshold but has not yet entered the door. If an ordinary person uses your poem in their practice, they won’t regress. But someone who seeks perfect enlightenment will never realize it by means of such an understanding. If you want to enter the door, you have to see your nature. Go back and think about this for a few days and write me another poem. If you can enter the

door and see your nature, I will give you the robe and the Dharma.' Shenxiu left, but after several days he still hadn't written anything."

Eight: "It happened that one of the novices walked past the milling room chanting Shenxiu's poem. As soon as I heard it, I knew it was by someone who hadn't seen their nature or understood what was really important. I asked the boy, 'What poem were you reciting just now?'

"The novice said, 'Don't you know? The abbot said nothing is more important than life and death, and he wants to pass on his robe and Dharma. He told his disciples to write a poem and show it to him, and he'll give his robe and Dharma to whichever disciple understands what is truly important, and that person will become the Sixth Patriarch. One of the senior monks, Shenxiu, wrote this "Formless Poem" on the south corridor. The Patriarch told all of us to recite it and whoever understands this poem will see their nature and whoever uses it for their practice will achieve liberation.'

"I said, 'I've been treading this mill more than eight months, and I've never been to the front of the Patriarch's Hall. Could you please lead me to the south corridor so I can see this poem and pay my respects? Hopefully, by reciting it, I'll establish a karmic connection for a future life. I'd like to be reborn in a land where there is a buddha.'

"The novice then led me to the south corridor, and I bowed before the poem. Because I was illiterate, I asked someone to read it. Once I heard it, I realized what was truly important and also composed a poem. I asked someone who could write to write it on the west corridor wall so I could reveal my mind. Unless a person knows their mind, studying the Dharma is useless. But once someone knows their mind and sees their nature, they understand what is truly important. My poem went:

'Bodhi isn't some kind of tree
this mirror doesn't have a stand
our buddha nature is forever clear
where do you get this dust?'

Then I composed another one:

‘The mind is the bodhi tree
the body is the mirror’s stand
the mirror itself is so clear
dust has no place to land.’

“When the disciples in the courtyard saw these poems of mine, they were dumbfounded. After I went back to the milling room, the Fifth Patriarch came down the corridor and saw them too. He knew I understood what was important, but he was worried that others would find out. So he told everyone, ‘This one doesn’t get it either.’”¹⁸

Nine: “At the beginning of the third watch, the Fifth Patriarch called me into his room and explained the Diamond Sutra to me. As soon as I heard the words, I understood, and that night, unknown to anyone, I received the Dharma. He transmitted the robe and the instantaneous teaching to me, and I became the Sixth Patriarch.

“He said, ‘The robe is an embodiment of trust handed down from one generation to the next, while the Dharma is transmitted mind to mind and has to be realized by people themselves.’

“The Fifth Patriarch then said, ‘Huineng, since long ago the lives of those to whom this teaching has been transmitted have hung by a thread. If you stay here, someone will harm you. You have to leave right now.’”

Ten: “After receiving the robe and the Dharma, I left just after midnight. The Fifth Patriarch accompanied me as far as the Jiujiang Ferry 九江驛.¹⁹ As I boarded, we said goodbye. The Patriarch instructed me, ‘Go now, and do your best to take the Dharma south. But don’t teach for three years. This teaching will be hard to spread. Later, when you do teach, use skillful means. Once those who are deluded are able to open their minds, they are no different from those who are enlightened.’ Our farewells done, I headed south.”

Eleven: “In less than two months, I reached Dayu Ridge 大庾嶺.²⁰ I was unaware that several hundred people had been chasing me, hoping to get the Patriarch’s robe and the Dharma. But they had given up halfway and had gone back, all except one monk, whose surname was Chen 陳 and whose Dharma name was Huishun 惠順. He had previously been a general of the third grade, and he was a rough character. When he caught up with me at the ridge, I offered him the Patriarch’s robe. But he wouldn’t take it. He said, ‘I’ve come all this way for the Dharma. I don’t want the robe.’ So I transmitted the Dharma to Huishun there at the ridge. He was ready, and as soon as I spoke, his mind opened. I told him to go back north and teach others.”

Twelve: “I have come here today because I have a connection of many lifetimes with all of you officials and clerics and laypeople. This teaching was passed down by the sages of the past. It isn’t something I discovered by myself. If you wish to hear this ancient teaching, you must listen with clear minds and resolve to get rid of your delusions and understand it as past generations have.”

Huineng then yelled, “Good friends! The prajna wisdom of enlightenment is something everyone already possesses. But because your minds are deluded, you can’t understand by yourselves. You need to find a truly good friend to show you how to see your nature. Good friends, this buddha nature isn’t different for the ignorant or the wise. It just depends whether people are deluded or awake. When people are deluded, they’re ignorant. When they’re awake, they’re wise.”

Thirteen: “Good friends, this Dharma of mine is based on meditation and wisdom.²¹ But don’t make the mistake of thinking meditation and wisdom are separate. Meditation and wisdom are one, not two. Meditation is the body of wisdom, and wisdom is the function of meditation. Wherever you find wisdom, you find meditation. Wherever you find meditation, you find wisdom. Good friends, what this means is that meditation and wisdom are one.

“Fellow students of the Way, pay attention. Don’t think that meditation comes first then gives rise to wisdom or that wisdom comes first then gives rise to meditation or that meditation and wisdom are separate. For those who hold such views, the Dharma is dualistic. When you speak about what is good, but what you think about isn’t good, meditation and wisdom aren’t one. But when what you say and think about are both good, when the external and internal are alike, meditation and wisdom are one.

“The cultivation of self-awareness does not involve arguments. Those who argue about which comes first and which comes second only confuse people. Until you put an end to thoughts of victory and defeat, you will give rise to the self-existence of dharmas and never get free of the four states of existence.”²²

Fourteen: “One Practice Samadhi²³ means at all times, whether walking, standing, sitting, or lying down, always practicing with an undivided mind. The Vimalakirti Sutra says, ‘An undivided mind is the place of enlightenment’ and ‘an undivided mind is the pure land.’²⁴ Don’t practice hypocrisy with your mind and talk about being undivided with your lips. If you speak about One Practice Samadhi with your lips, but you don’t practice with an undivided mind, you’re not a disciple of the Buddha. Simply practice with an undivided mind and don’t become attached to any dharma. This is what is meant by One Practice Samadhi.

“Deluded people attached to external attributes get hold of One Practice Samadhi and say that sitting motionless, eliminating delusions, or not thinking thoughts is One Practice Samadhi. If that were true, it would be the same as being unconscious. It would block the Way. The Way has to flow without obstruction. Why would you block it? The Way flows freely when the mind doesn’t dwell on anything. Once it dwells on something, it is imprisoned. If sitting motionless were right, Vimalakirti wouldn’t have criticized Sariputra for meditating in the forest.”²⁵

“Good friends, I know there are those who tell others to concentrate on contemplating the purity of their minds and not to move or think. Deluded people don’t understand and insist on turning

things upside down. There are hundreds of such people who teach the Way like this. But they are, you should know, greatly mistaken.”

Fifteen: “Good friends, what are meditation and wisdom like? They are like a lamp and its light. Where there’s a lamp, there’s light. Where there’s no lamp, there’s no light. The lamp is the light’s body, and the light is the lamp’s function. They have two names but not two bodies. Our teaching of meditation and wisdom is also like this.”

Sixteen: “Good friends, the Dharma isn’t instantaneous or gradual. It’s people who are sharp or dull. For those who are deluded, there is constant encouragement. For those who are aware, there is instantaneous practice: ‘know your mind and see your nature.’ For those who are aware, there are absolutely no distinctions. For those who aren’t aware, there are infinite kalpas on the Wheel of Rebirth.”

Seventeen: “Good friends, since ancient times, this Dharma teaching of ours, both its instantaneous and gradual versions, has proclaimed ‘no idea’ as its doctrine, ‘no form’ as its body, and ‘no attachment’ as its foundation.

“What do we mean by a form that has ‘no form’? To be free of form in the presence of forms. And what about ‘no idea’? Not to think about ideas. And ‘no attachment’? This is everyone’s original nature, thought after thought being unattached. Whether it’s a past thought, a present thought, or a future thought, let one thought follow another without interruption. Once a thought is interrupted, your dharma body becomes separated from your material body. As you go from one thought to another, don’t become attached. Once one thought becomes attached, every thought becomes attached. You become imprisoned. But as long as you go from one thought to another without becoming attached, there is no prison. This is why ‘no attachment’ is our foundation.

“Good friends, ‘no form’ means externally to be free of all forms. If you can just be free of forms, the body of your own nature will be perfectly clear. This is why we take ‘no form’ as our body.

“Not to be affected by anything external is what is meant by ‘no idea,’ to be free of objects in our thoughts and not to give rise to

thoughts about things. But don't stop thinking and think about nothing at all. If your thoughts stop, you will die and be reborn somewhere else. Students of the Way, use your minds. Don't misunderstand the meaning of this teaching. It is one thing to be mistaken yourself, quite another to lead others astray by criticizing the teaching of the sutras while remaining unaware that you yourself are lost. Thus, the reason we proclaim 'no idea' as our doctrine is because deluded people think in terms of objects, and on the basis of these ideas they give rise to erroneous views. This is the origin of all afflictions and delusions.

"But when this school proclaims 'no idea' as its doctrine, and people stop thinking about objects, and they have no ideas, we do not then advocate 'no ideas.' What does 'no' negate? And what idea is 'idea' about? 'No' negates the dualities of affliction and delusion. And 'idea' is the idea of the original nature of reality. Reality is the embodiment of ideas, and ideas are the function of reality. When your nature gives rise to an idea, even though you sense something, remain free of it and don't be affected by the world of objects. The Vimalakirti Sutra says, 'Externally, be skilled at distinguishing the attributes of dharmas. Internally, remain unmoved by the ultimate truth.'"26

Eighteen: "Good friends, in this school of the Dharma, when we practice Zen, we don't contemplate the mind, and we don't contemplate purity, and we don't talk about being imperturbable.

"If someone says to contemplate the mind, the mind is basically a delusion. And since a delusion is the same as an illusion, there is nothing to contemplate.

"If someone says to contemplate purity, your nature is already pure. It is because of delusions that reality is obscured. As long as you are free of delusions, your nature is pure. If you don't see that your nature is already pure, and you decide to contemplate purity, you create the delusion of purity instead. A delusion doesn't actually exist, but whatever you contemplate is a delusion.

"As for purity, it has no form or attributes. If someone assigns attributes to purity and thinks they have achieved something, those

who hold such a view obstruct their own nature and become trapped by purity instead.

“As for cultivating imperturbability, as long as someone doesn’t pay attention to the faults of others, their nature is imperturbable. But when deluded people act imperturbable, as soon as they open their mouths, they talk about right and wrong and turn their backs on the Way. Contemplating the mind and contemplating purity are actually what keep them from seeing the Way.”

Nineteen: “That being so, what does this school of ours mean by ‘practicing Zen’? By ‘practicing,’ this school of ours means not being obstructed by anything and not giving rise to ideas about external objective states. And by ‘Zen,’ we mean seeing your nature without being confused.

“And what do we mean by ‘Zen meditation’? Externally, to be free from appearances is ‘Zen.’ Internally, not to be confused is ‘meditation.’ As long as you are attached to external appearances, your mind will be confused internally. But as long as you are free from external appearances, internally your nature won’t be confused.

“Your nature itself is pure and in samadhi. It is just that you come into contact with objects, and as you do, you become confused. When you are free from appearances and not confused, you are in samadhi. To be free from appearances externally is ‘Zen.’ Not to be confused internally is ‘meditation.’ External Zen and internal meditation, this is what we mean by ‘Zen meditation.’

“The Vimalakirti Sutra says, ‘Suddenly, all at once, you rediscover your original mind.’²⁷ And the Bodhisattva Precept Sutra²⁸ says, ‘Our original nature is pure.’ Good friends, see the purity of your own nature and put the dharma body of your own nature to work in your practice. Do what a buddha does. Set forth and complete the path to buddhahood yourselves.”

Twenty: “Good friends, as I confer on you the Formless Precepts, you must experience them for yourselves. Recite this together with me, and it will enable you to see the three-bodied buddha within you:

‘I take refuge in the pure dharma body buddha

in my own material body.

I take refuge in the myriadfold manifestation body buddha

in my own material body.

I take refuge in the yet-to-be-perfected realization body buddha

in my own material body.'

Now recite this three times.

"This material body is but an inn and not a worthy refuge, whereas the three bodies I just mentioned constitute your unobstructed dharma nature. Everyone has them, but because people are deluded, they don't see them. They look for the three-bodied tathagata outside themselves and don't see the three-bodied buddha in their own material body.

"Good friends, listen to this good friend of yours. I will tell you how to recognize the three-bodied buddha of your dharma nature in your material body, the three-bodied buddha that is born from this nature of yours.

"What do I mean by the pure dharma body buddha? Good friends, everyone's nature is fundamentally pure, and everything is present in this nature of yours. If you think about something bad, you will do something bad. If you think about something good, you will do something good. Realize that everything is present in this nature of yours. But your nature itself remains pure. The sun and moon are always shining. It is only when they are blocked by clouds that the light is above and darkness below, and you can't see them. Then suddenly a welcome wind comes and blows the clouds away, and all the countless images of the world suddenly appear.

"Your nature is pure like the clear sky, and your wisdom is like the sun or the moon. It is always shining. It is because you become attached to external objects and the clouds of delusion cover your nature that you can't see it. But because you meet a good friend who explains the true Dharma, your delusions are driven off, and everything in this nature of yours appears perfectly clear. This nature of yours in which everything is present is what I mean by the pure dharma body. When you take refuge in yourself and get rid of bad thoughts and practices, this is called taking refuge.

“What do I mean by the myriadfold manifestation body? If you didn’t think, your nature would be utterly empty. When you think, you manifest yourself. If you think bad thoughts, you become a denizen of hell. If you think good thoughts, you turn into a deva of heaven. Malice turns you into a beast, and compassion turns you into a bodhisattva. Wisdom transports you to the higher realms, and ignorance sends you into the lower realms. Although their nature is constantly manifesting itself, deluded people are unaware of this.

“Whenever a thought is good, wisdom arises. Just as a single lamp can dispel a thousand years of darkness, a single thought of wisdom can end ten thousand years of ignorance. Don’t think about what is past. Think about what is next. When the next thought is always good, that is what we call the realization body. One bad thought results in the destruction of a thousand years of good ones. But one good thought results in the annihilation of a thousand years of bad ones. And once they’re gone, as long as your next thought is a good one, that is the realization body.

“The thoughts that come from the dharma body are your manifestation body. When every thought is good, that is your realization body. When you become aware of this and put this into practice, that is called taking refuge. Your material body is made of flesh and bones, but your material body is merely an inn and can’t be called a refuge. Once you become aware of your three bodies, you will understand what is truly important.”

Twenty-one: “Good friends, now that you have taken refuge in the three-bodied buddha, let us make the Four Boundless Vows. Good friends, recite after me:

‘I vow to liberate all beings,
no matter how numberless.
I vow to end all afflictions,
no matter how countless.
I vow to master all teachings,
no matter how limitless.
I vow to complete the path to buddhahood,
no matter how unachievable.’

Now recite this three times.

“Good friends, as for ‘I vow to liberate all beings, no matter how numberless,’ it isn’t we who do the liberating. Good friends, the beings in our minds all liberate themselves with their own natures in their own bodies.

“What does it mean ‘they liberate themselves with their own natures’? The mistaken views and afflictions, the ignorance and delusions within their material bodies already possess the nature of original enlightenment. It is just this nature of original enlightenment that liberates them by means of right views.²⁹ Once beings realize the prajna wisdom of right views, they rid themselves of ignorance and delusion, and each being liberates themselves. The mistaken are liberated by means of the truth. The deluded are liberated by means of awareness. The ignorant are liberated by means of wisdom. The bad are liberated by means of goodness. And the afflicted are liberated by means of enlightenment. Those who are liberated in this manner are truly liberated.

“As for ‘I vow to end all afflictions, no matter how countless,’ this means to get rid of the delusions of your own mind. ‘I vow to master all teachings, no matter how limitless’ means to study the true, unsurpassed Dharma. And ‘I vow to complete the path to buddhahood, no matter how unachievable’ means always to practice with humility, to respect all beings, to avoid attachments, to give rise to prajna awareness, and to put an end to delusions. Thus the attainment of buddhahood through your own realization is the result of your vows.”

Twenty-two: “Good friends, having made the Four Boundless Vows, let me now recite for you the Formless Repentances that destroy karmic barriers of the past, the present, and the future.”

The Master said, “Good friends,

‘May past, present, and future thoughts
may thought after thought
not be corrupted by delusion
may bad deeds of the past be gone
may they be gone from my nature

such is my repentance.

May past, present, and future thoughts
may thought after thought
not be corrupted by ignorance
may deceitful thoughts of the past be gone
may they be gone from my nature
such is my repentance.

May past, present, and future thoughts
may thought after thought
not be corrupted by ulcerous hate³⁰
may hateful thoughts of the past be gone
may they be gone from my nature
such is my repentance.'

Now recite this three times.

"Good friends, what does repentance mean? Repentance means to be aware of past mistakes and not to commit them for the rest of your life. Unless your mind is forever free of evil, reciting this before buddhas won't help. In this Dharma teaching of mine, repentance means to stop once and for all."

Twenty-three: "Good friends, now that you have repented, I will transmit to you the Formless Precepts of the Triple Refuge."

The Master said, "Good friends,

'Take refuge in enlightenment
and the best of two-legged creatures.
Take refuge in truth
and the best of what transcends desire.
Take refuge in purity
and the best of congregations.'

"Beginning today, call the Buddha your teacher. Never again take refuge in the mistaken teachings of other paths. Resolve to manifest the compassion of your own Three Treasures. Good friends, I urge

you all to take refuge in the Three Treasures of your own nature, wherein 'Buddha' means enlightenment, 'Dharma' means truth, and 'Sangha' means purity.

"Take refuge in the enlightenment of your own minds. Those who don't give rise to delusions, who have few desires and know contentment, who aren't moved by money or sex, they are the 'best of two-legged creatures.'

"Take refuge in the truth of your own minds. When your thoughts are free of delusion, you are thereby free of attachment. To be free of attachment is the 'best of what transcends desire.'

"Take refuge in the purity of your own minds. No matter how many afflictions and delusions are present in your nature, when your nature remains undefiled, this is the 'best of congregations.'

"Ordinary people don't understand this. Day after day, they repeat the Precepts of the Triple Refuge. But when they say they take refuge in the Buddha, where is the buddha? If they don't see the buddha, they aren't taking refuge in anything. And if they aren't taking refuge in anything, their words are meaningless.

"Good friends, each of you should examine this for yourselves. Don't misdirect your attention. The sutras simply say to take refuge in the buddha within yourself. They don't say to take refuge in a buddha somewhere else. If you don't take refuge in your own nature, there is nowhere else to take refuge."

Twenty-four: "Good friends, now that you have finished taking refuge in the Three Treasures, each of you should clear your minds, and I will transmit to you the teaching of Maha Prajnaparamita. Good friends, you may have chanted this without understanding it. But if you listen, I will explain it.

"*Maha Prajnaparamita* is Sanskrit. In our language it means 'The Great Wisdom That Leads to the Other Shore.' This teaching must be practiced and not simply chanted with your lips. If all you do is chant it, but you don't practice it, it's the same as an illusion or a mirage. Meanwhile, the dharma body of those who practice it is the same as a buddha's.

"What does *maha* mean? *Maha* means 'great.' The capacity of the mind is great, like space. But if you practice 'empty-mind Zen,'

you will fall into a featureless void. The space of this world has room for the sun and the moon and the stars, the Earth and its mountains and rivers, every plant and tree, bad people and good people, bad teachings and good teachings, the heavens and the hells. All of this exists in space. The emptiness of everyone's nature is also like this."

Twenty-five: "Our nature contains ten thousand dharmas. That is how great it is. The ten thousand dharmas are our nature. To see humans and nonhumans, good ones and bad ones, good dharmas and bad dharmas, without rejecting them and without becoming attached to them, as if they were space, this is what we mean by 'great.' This is what *maha* means.

"Deluded people chant this with their lips; the wise practice it with their minds. Others who are deluded say having an empty mind and not thinking are 'great.' But that isn't it either. The capacity of the mind is great, but if you don't use it, it is small. If you merely talk about emptiness with your lips, but you don't put it into practice, you are no disciple of mine."

Twenty-six: "What does *prajna* mean? *Prajna* means 'wisdom.' At all times keeping your thoughts free of ignorance and constantly practicing wisdom, this is what we mean by 'practicing prajna.' One thought of ignorance, and prajna stops. One thought of wisdom, and prajna appears. People whose minds are beset by ignorance say, 'I am practicing prajna.' But prajna has neither form nor attributes. It is the nature of wisdom.

"And what does *paramita* mean? This is Sanskrit. In our language, we say 'what leads to the other shore,' which means what transcends arising and cessation. When we become attached to objects, we cause things to arise and to cease, like when there are waves on a river. This is what we mean by 'this shore.' When we are free of objects, there is no arising or cessation, like when a river flows on unimpeded. Hence, we say 'what leads to the other shore.' This is what we mean by *paramita*.

"Deluded people chant this with their lips. The wise practice it with their minds. If delusions are present when you chant, because

they are present, it doesn't really exist.³¹ But if you practice it when you chant, then it really exists.

"Those who understand this teaching, understand the teaching of prajna and practice the practice of prajna. Those who don't practice it are foolish people. If they could practice it for even one moment, their dharma body would be the same as a buddha's. Good friends, affliction is enlightenment. One moment you're a deluded fool. The next moment you're an enlightened buddha.

"Good friends, Maha Prajnaparamita is the noblest, the highest, the ultimate. It doesn't exist in the present, the past, or the future. And yet the buddhas of the present, the past, and the future all come from it and use this great wisdom to reach the other shore and to break through the afflictions of the five skandhas.

"As the noblest, the highest, the ultimate, so should you praise this teaching of the Supreme Vehicle. Those who practice it are certain to become buddhas. Containing nothing from the past, the present, or the future, it is the combination of meditation and wisdom and is not debased by any dharma. The buddhas of the past, the present, and the future all come from this and use this to transform the three poisons³² into morality, meditation, and wisdom."

Twenty-seven: "Good friends, this Dharma teaching of mine produces eighty-four thousand kinds of wisdom from prajna. And how so? Because people have eighty-four thousand afflictions. If you didn't have any afflictions, prajna would be ever-present and inseparable from your nature.

"To awaken to this teaching is to have 'no-idea,' 'no-memory,' and 'no-attachment.' Not giving rise to delusions, this is the nature of suchness.³³ View all dharmas with wisdom. Neither grasp them nor reject them. This is the way to see your nature and become a buddha."

Twenty-eight: "Good friends, if you wish to enter the dharma realm of the deep mind, the prajna samadhi, you need only practice the practice of Prajnaparamita. By merely memorizing a single chapter of the Diamond Prajnaparamita Sutra, you will be able to see your

nature and enter the prajna samadhi. Indeed, such a person's merit has no limit and is praised at length in the sutra as beyond description.

"This is the teaching of the Supreme Vehicle, which is spoken on behalf of those with a great capacity for the highest wisdom. When those of lesser capacity hear this teaching, they fail to develop any faith in it. And why not? It is like when the great dragon sends down a heavy rain, and it rains on Jambudvīpa³⁴ until its towns and villages are all swept away like leaves. But if the same rain falls on the ocean, it isn't affected.

"When those who follow the Mahayana hear the Diamond Sutra, their minds open and understand. Thus they realize that their original nature already possesses the wisdom of prajna. And once they use this wisdom to view things, they don't need to rely on words. It is like the rain, which doesn't come from the heavens but from the dragon king, who draws water from the rivers and seas into his body, then uses it to nourish every plant and being, the sentient and non-sentient. Just as rivers all flow back into the ocean, and the ocean absorbs and combines them into its one body, the prajna wisdom that is the original nature of all beings is also like this."

Twenty-nine: "When people of small capacity hear this instantaneous teaching, they are like plants that have shallow roots. If they should get drenched by a heavy rain, they are soon uprooted, or they don't grow well. People of small capacity are also like this. They all possess the wisdom of prajna, the same as people who are truly wise. So why don't they understand the Dharma when they hear it? It is because the walls of their mistaken views are so impenetrable, and their afflictions so deep. It is like when thick clouds cover the sun. Unless the wind blows them away, the sun can't shine through.

"It isn't the wisdom of prajna that is great or small. It is because all these beings have deluded themselves into looking for the buddha through external practices and haven't yet discovered their own nature that they remain people of small capacity. And yet, on hearing this instantaneous teaching, if they don't depend on external practices but simply on their own mind, and they let their own nature

give rise to right views, even these beings with their mistaken views and afflictions will suddenly wake up. And like the ocean that takes in all rivers, the great and the small, and combines them into one, they will see their nature. And not focusing on the internal or external, they will come and go freely and be able to rid themselves of attachments and to penetrate everything without restriction. The mind that cultivates such a practice is no different from that of the Prajnaparamita Sutra.”³⁵

Thirty: “All the sutras and texts, all twelve divisions of the Hinayana and Mahayana canons, were arranged by people. And it was because of the nature of wisdom that they could do so. Moreover, if there were no people in the world, none of the ten thousand teachings would have appeared. Hence, the ten thousand teachings have arisen because of people, and the sutras all exist because somebody spoke them.

“Some people in the world are foolish and some are wise. The foolish are narrow-minded, and the wise are open-minded. So the foolish ask the wise, and the wise teach the foolish until the foolish understand and their minds open. But once foolish people understand and their minds open, they are no different from the wisest of the wise.

“Hence, until they understand, buddhas are ordinary beings. But the moment they understand, ordinary beings are buddhas. Thus, the ten thousand teachings are all present within your very own mind. So why don’t you use your own mind to see the nature of reality right now?

“The Bodhisattva Precept Sutra says, ‘Our original nature is pure.’ When you know your mind and see your nature, you complete the path to buddhahood. The Vimalakirti Sutra says, ‘Suddenly, all at once, you rediscover your original mind.’”³⁶

Thirty-one: “Good friends, when I was with Master Hongren, as soon as I heard his words, I experienced a great realization. Suddenly I saw the original nature of reality. I am therefore passing on this teaching to later generations so that those who study the Way

will suddenly realize enlightenment and so that those who contemplate the mind³⁷ will suddenly realize their original nature. If someone is unable to realize this by themselves, they need to find a truly good friend to point the way to their nature.

“And what do I mean by a ‘truly good friend’? Someone who understands the teaching of the Supreme Vehicle and who points directly to the true path is a truly good friend, a great intermediary, someone who transforms the path they are on so that they see their nature. All good teachings come about only because of truly good friends.

“The buddhas of the three periods and the twelve divisions of the canon³⁸ are fully present in this nature of yours. If you can’t realize this by yourselves, you will need to find a good friend to show you how to see your nature. But if you can realize this by yourselves, you don’t need to look for a friend anywhere else. If you think just by finding a good friend somewhere you’ll attain liberation, that will never happen. You will be liberated as soon as you recognize the good friend in your own mind. But as long as your mind is confused by mistaken views and delusions, even the instruction of a good friend from somewhere else won’t be able to help you.

“If you can’t realize this by yourself, the moment you give rise to the light of prajna, all your delusions will vanish in a flash. This is your truest friend. With one realization you reach the stage of buddhahood. Use this wisdom to illuminate your own nature in the land of your mind.³⁹ When it is perfectly clear inside and out, then you will know your own mind. And once you know your own mind, you will attain liberation. And when you attain liberation, this is the prajna samadhi, the realization of which is ‘no idea.’

“And what do we mean by ‘no idea’? The teaching of no idea means wherever you go not to be attached to any dharma no matter what you see, so that when the six thieves⁴⁰ pass through the six gates, and the six objects come and go, your nature remains pure and isn’t corrupted by them. This is the prajna samadhi, the freedom of liberation. This is what we mean by the practice of no idea. But if you don’t think about anything at all, the moment you make your

thoughts stop, you are imprisoned by dharmas with what we call a 'confined view.'

"Those who understand the teaching of no idea penetrate the ten thousand teachings. Those who understand the teaching of no idea see the realms of buddhas. Those who understand the instantaneous teaching of no idea reach the stage of enlightenment."

Thirty-two: "Good friends, those who obtain my Dharma in the future will find that my true body never leaves their presence. Good friends, if you resolve to uphold the same view and the same practice as this school's instantaneous teaching, it will be as if you were doing the work of a buddha. Those who uphold it and don't forsake it for the rest of their lives will themselves enter the ranks of sages. But it has to be passed on. The robe and the teaching that have been transmitted in silence since ancient times have to be shared with those who make the great vow never to retreat from enlightenment.

"If you meet someone who holds a different view and who lacks such resolve, don't be foolish enough to try to instruct them. Not only will you harm those who have come before you, ultimately it won't do them any good. Moreover, if they are too foolish to understand, and they criticize this teaching, they will sever their roots of enlightenment for thousands of lifetimes and hundreds of kalpas."

Thirty-three: The Master said, "Good friends, listen to my 'Song of Formlessness.' Because it can put an end to the evils of those who are deluded, it is also called the 'Evil Ending Song':

'Fools work for blessings not for the Way
working for blessings they say is the Way
from offerings and alms their blessings pile up
while committing evil deeds fills their minds.

Their blessings they think will get rid of retribution
retribution next life is there with their blessings
in order to free your mind of retribution
true repentance must take place within.

Those who understand true Mahayana repentance
choose right over wrong and retribution ends
students of the Way who learn to look within
join the lineage of those who are enlightened.

Today I'm giving you this instantaneous teaching
hoping all you students will join me
if in the future you seek your true self
wash the bad karma of the poisons from your mind.

Devote yourselves to the Way and don't relax
otherwise you will pass this life in vain
to meet the Mahayana's instantaneous teaching
join your palms together and look for your mind."

After the Master had finished his discourse on the Dharma, Magistrate Wei and his fellow officials along with all the monks and laypeople present praised this without cease as something the like of which they had never heard before.

Thirty-four: The Magistrate then bowed and said, "Master, your discourse on the Dharma is beyond description. But your disciple has some questions he hopes the Master will resolve out of compassion."

The Master said, "If you have a question, ask. There is no need to wait."

The Magistrate asked, "The Dharma the Master teaches is the fundamental doctrine of Bodhidharma, the First Patriarch from the Western Region, is it not?"

The Master said, "Yes, it is."

The Magistrate asked, "Your disciple has heard that when Bodhidharma taught Emperor Wu of the Liang dynasty, the Emperor asked Bodhidharma, 'All my life I have built monasteries, made offerings, and given alms. Is there any merit in this?' Bodhidharma answered, 'No merit at all.' The Emperor was so upset, he expelled Bodhidharma from his kingdom. I have never understood this and hope the Master will explain it."

The Sixth Patriarch said, “Indeed, there was no merit. Your Eminence should not have any doubts concerning Bodhidharma’s response. Emperor Wu followed a mistaken path and did not understand the true Dharma.”

The Magistrate asked, “But why was there no merit?”

The Master said, “Building monasteries, giving alms, and making offerings are simply ways to cultivate blessings. You shouldn’t confuse blessings with merit. Merit concerns the dharma body, not future blessings. It is your own dharma nature⁴¹ that possesses merit. Seeing your nature is one part. Having an undivided mind is the rest. Internally, see your own buddha nature. Externally, be respectful. As long as you look down on others and don’t get rid of the self, there is no merit. As long as your nature remains an empty fiction, how could your dharma body possess any merit? But if thought after thought you cultivate an undivided mind, your merit is far from slight. As long as you act respectfully, cultivating merit with your body is one part, and cultivating it with your mind is the other. Merit is created by your own mind. Blessings and merit are different. Emperor Wu didn’t understand the true meaning of this. It wasn’t the Patriarch who was at fault.”

Thirty-five: The Magistrate bowed respectfully and asked again, “Your disciple sees monks and laypeople chanting ‘Amita Buddha’ and vowing to be reborn in the Western Paradise.⁴² Could the Master please tell us whether we can be reborn there or not so that our doubts might be put to rest?”

The Master said, “If Your Eminence will listen, I will explain. When the Blessed One was in Sravasti,⁴³ he preached about the Western Paradise in order to convert people. The sutra clearly states that it isn’t far from here.⁴⁴ It was only for the sake of those with shallow roots that he said it was distant.⁴⁵ It was for those with greater wisdom that he said it was near. There are two kinds of people, not two kinds of Dharma. Delusion and awareness differ, and insight can be fast or slow. Deluded people chant the buddha’s name in order to be reborn there, while those who are awake purify their minds. This

is why the Buddha said, 'As their minds are purified, their buddhalands are purified.'⁴⁶

"Your Eminence, if people here in the East simply purify their minds, they will free themselves of retribution. But if people in the West have excessively impure minds, the deluded among them might then vow to be reborn here in the East. The two places are both the same. As long as the land of the mind isn't impure, the Western Paradise isn't far off. But as long as your mind gives rise to impure thoughts, you are not likely to be reborn there by chanting the buddha's name. You might travel a hundred thousand miles before you eliminate the ten evil deeds⁴⁷ and another eight thousand before you put an end to the eight mistaken ways.⁴⁸ But if you can just practice with an undivided mind, you will be there in the time it takes to snap your fingers.

"Your Eminence, if you can just practice the ten good deeds,⁴⁹ why would you need to be reborn somewhere else? And if you don't stop thinking about committing the ten evil deeds, what buddha would welcome you there? Once you realize the instantaneous teaching of non-arising,⁵⁰ seeing the Western Paradise takes only an instant. Unless you understand the instantaneous teaching of the Mahayana, chanting the buddha's name to be reborn there will take you on a road that never arrives."

The Sixth Patriarch said, "I will take Your Eminence to the Western Paradise right now, and he will witness it for himself. Would Your Eminence like to see it?"

The Magistrate bowed respectfully and said, "If I could see it right now, why would I need to be reborn there? If the Master would be compassionate enough to show us the Western Paradise, that would be wonderful, indeed!"

The Master said, "I will show you the Western Paradise right now, and we won't leave there until you have no more questions." The assembly was startled, and no one knew what to expect.

The Master said, "All of you should listen carefully. Everyone's physical body is a walled city. Your eyes, ears, nose, tongue, and body are the city's gates. These five gates are on the outside. The gate of the intellect is on the inside. Your mind is the kingdom, and

your nature is the king. When your nature is present, the king is present. When your nature is absent, the king is absent. When your nature is present, both your body and mind exist. When your nature is absent, your body and mind cease to exist. The buddha is a creation of your nature. Don't go looking for one outside your body. When you are blind to your own nature, the buddha is an ordinary being. When you are aware of your own nature, an ordinary being is the buddha.

"Compassion and kindness are Avalokitesvara. Joy and detachment are Mahasthama.⁵¹ The power to purify is Sakyamuni. Directness is Maitreya.⁵² The self is Mount Sumeru, and the deluded mind is the ocean.⁵³ Afflictions are its waves, poisonous thoughts its malevolent dragons, and passions its denizens of the deep. Delusions are its hungry ghosts, the three poisons are its hells, ignorance is its animal world, and the ten good deeds are its heavens.

"But when there is no self, Sumeru crumbles. When you get rid of mistaken views, the ocean dries up. When afflictions are gone, so are the waves. When poisonous thoughts disappear, the denizens of the deep vanish. When the tathagata of your enlightened nature shines the light of wisdom across the land of your mind, it shines through the six gates and renders the realms of the six desires transparent. It drives off the three poisons, and the hells disappear. Inside and outside are perfectly clear and no different from that of the Western Paradise. Unless you practice like this, how else are you going to get there?"

When the audience heard this, the sound of their praises reached the sky, and those who had been mystified suddenly saw clearly. The Magistrate then bowed respectfully and said, "How wonderful! How absolutely wonderful! May all the beings throughout the Dharma Realm be enlightened upon hearing this!"

Thirty-six: The Master said, "Good friends, if you wish to practice this, you can also do so at home. You don't need to live in a monastery. If you live in a monastery and don't practice, you're like someone in the Western Paradise who thinks evil thoughts. And if

you practice at home, you're like someone here in the East who performs good deeds. As long as you vow to cultivate purity within yourselves, that is the Western Paradise."

The Magistrate asked, "Master, how should we practice at home? Could you give us some instruction?"

The Master said, "Good friends, I have composed a 'Song of Formlessness' for both clerics and laypeople. If you all recite this and put it into practice, you will never be apart from me:

'Clear in speech and thought
like the sun in a cloudless sky
I only teach the instant teaching
I am here to dispel false doctrines.

It isn't the teaching that is instant or not
but awareness that is quick or slow
who studies this instant teaching
will never succeed if they're fools.

Of the countless ways to explain it
all are based on one rule
in your dark house of affliction
keep the sun of wisdom shining.

Wrong views are caused by afflictions
when right views shine afflictions depart
where right and wrong don't function
there is nothing left to purify.

Enlightenment is already pure
to reflect on it is a delusion
but what is pure is in that delusion
just break through the three walls.⁵⁴

If in this world you follow the Way
don't let anything block you
paying attention to your own mistakes
will keep you on the path.

The Way dwells in this bodily form
don't leave the Way to find it
you won't find it somewhere else
all you will find is regret.

If you want to find the true Way
doing what is right is the Way
unless your mind is set on what is right
you will pass the Way in the dark.

People who truly follow the Way
don't look at the faults of the world
who looks at the faults of the world
only adds to their own.

I don't condemn the faults of others
my own wrongs are what I condemn
once you stop trying to lay blame
all your afflictions will shatter.

If you want to teach foolish people
you need to use skillful means
don't let them have any doubts
suddenly their enlightenment will occur.

The Dharma has always been in this world
stay in this world to transcend it
don't run away from this world⁵⁵
looking for a world beyond.

Wrong views exist in this world
right views transcend this world
when right and wrong are both dismissed
the nature of enlightenment is clear.

This is the instantaneous teaching
also known as the Mahayana
delusion can last for countless kalpas

enlightenment occurs in an instant.”

Thirty-seven: The Master said, “Good friends, if you all recite this song and practice in accordance with it, even if we are a thousand miles apart, you will always be at my side. And if you don’t practice in accordance with it, even if we are face-to-face, we will be a thousand miles apart. Each of you has to practice this for yourself. The Dharma won’t do it for you.

“It is time now for all of you to leave and for me to return to Mount Caoxi. If any of you have any doubts, come to the mountain. I will get rid of them for you, and you will see your buddha nature just as I see mine.”

The entire audience of officials, clerics, and laypeople all bowed to the Master, and everyone exclaimed, “We have never experienced such realization! Who would have guessed that we would be blessed with a buddha here in Lingnan!” Then everyone left.

Thirty-eight:⁵⁶ The Master lived on Mount Caoxi and preached in both Shaozhou and Guangzhou for more than forty years.⁵⁷ In terms of followers, both monks and nuns as well as laypeople, he had somewhere between three and five thousand, too many to name. As for his basic teaching, he transmitted the Platform Sutra and considered this his testament. Unless a person has received the Platform Sutra, they have no authority. And they need to state the place, the date, and the names of those who gave it to them. Without the authority of the Platform Sutra, they aren’t disciples of the Southern school. If they haven’t received this authority, even if they transmit the instantaneous teaching, as long as they don’t understand its fundamentals, they won’t be able to avoid arguments. As for those who have received this teaching, they are simply urged to practice it. Arguing involves thoughts of victory or defeat and is contrary to the Way of the Buddha.

Thirty-nine: People all refer to “Huineng of the South” and “Shenxiu of the North,” but they don’t know the real reason for this. It was because Master Shenxiu served as abbot and practiced at Yuquan

Temple 玉泉寺 in Nanqing Prefecture's Dangyang County 當陽縣,⁵⁸ and Master Huineng lived on Mount Caoxi, thirty-five *li* south of Shaozhou. There is only one school of the Dharma, but people are from the north or the south. This is why we use the terms "Northern" and "Southern."

And what about "instantaneous" and "gradual"? The Dharma is the same, but understanding can be fast or slow. When understanding is slow, we say it is "gradual." When understanding is quick, we say it is "instantaneous." The Dharma isn't instantaneous or gradual, it is people who are sharp or dull. This is why we speak of "instantaneous" and "gradual."

Forty: Master Shenxiu often heard people say Huineng's teaching was quick and pointed directly to the path. One day Shenxiu told his disciple Zhicheng 志誠, "You are intelligent and perceptive. Go to Huineng's place on Mount Caoxi for me. Pay your respects, but just listen. Don't say I sent you. When you hear something important, remember it and come back and tell me. We will see whose understanding is fast or slow, mine or Huineng's. And come back right away. Don't leave me hanging."

Zhicheng gladly accepted the mission and left. Within half a month⁵⁹ he reached Mount Caoxi and met Master Huineng. After he paid his respects, he just listened and didn't say where he was from. But as soon as Zhicheng heard the Master teach, he understood and became aware of his own mind. He stood up and bowed and said, "Master, your disciple has come from Yuquan Temple. At Shenxiu's place, I didn't experience any realization. But as soon as I heard the Master speak, I became aware of my mind. I hope the Master will be compassionate enough to instruct me."

Master Huineng said, "If that is where you are from, you must be a spy."

Zhicheng said, "I'm not a spy."

The Sixth Patriarch said, "And why not?"

Zhicheng said, "Before I spoke, I was. But now that I've spoken, I'm not."

The Sixth Patriarch said, "It is the same with 'affliction is enlightenment.'" ⁶⁰

Forty-one: The Master told Zhicheng, "I have heard that when your master teaches people, he simply gives instruction in morality, meditation, and wisdom. Tell me, what does your master teach them about morality, meditation, and wisdom?"

Zhicheng said, "As for morality, meditation, and wisdom, Master Shenxiu says, 'Not committing evil deeds is morality, performing good deeds is wisdom, and purifying one's thoughts is meditation. This is what morality, meditation, and wisdom mean.' That is his explanation. What is the Master's view?"

Huineng replied, "This explanation is excellent, but my view is different."

Zhicheng asked, "How is it different?"

Huineng replied, "Understanding can be fast or slow."

Zhicheng begged the Master to explain his view of morality, meditation, and wisdom.

The Master said, "Listen to my explanation, and you will see how I view them. When the ground of your mind is free from error, this is the nature of morality. When the ground of your mind is free from confusion, this is the nature of meditation. When the ground of your mind is free from ignorance, this is the nature of wisdom."

The Master continued, "The morality, meditation, and wisdom of your master are intended for small-minded people. My morality, meditation, and wisdom are intended for people with bigger minds. People who realize their nature don't separate morality, meditation, and wisdom."

Zhicheng said, "Could the Master please explain why they don't separate them?"

The Master said, "Our nature is free from error, free from confusion, and free from ignorance. Since prajna shines in every thought and is forever free from attributes, what is there to separate? We cultivate our nature right now. Since there are no intervening stages, we don't create any."

Zhicheng bowed and didn't leave Mount Caoxi. He became a disciple and was never far from the Master's side.

Forty-two: Another monk, named Fada 法達, had been reciting the Lotus Sutra for seven years but was bewildered as to its true teaching. He went to Mount Caoxi to pay his respects and asked the Master, “Your disciple has been reciting the Lotus Sutra for seven years, but I am bewildered as to its true teaching and have some questions about the sutra. I was hoping the Master would use his great wisdom to resolve them.”

The Master said, “Fada, you understand the Dharma. It is your mind you don’t understand.⁶¹ There are no questions in the sutra. It is your mind that has questions. You have been searching for the true teaching with a mistaken mind. I enter samadhi, that is how I read sutras. All my life I have been illiterate. But if you read the Lotus to me, I will understand it when I hear it.”

Fada then read the sutra to the Master.⁶² Once the Sixth Patriarch heard, he understood the Buddha’s meaning. Then he explained the Lotus Sutra to Fada.

The Sixth Patriarch said, “The Lotus Sutra is not that complicated. Its seven folios contain nothing but metaphors about causation. The reason the Tathagata taught the Three Vehicles⁶³ was simply because people are slow to understand. But the sutra makes it clear that there is no vehicle other than the One Vehicle.”

The Master said, “Fada, pay attention to the One Vehicle. Don’t go looking for a second vehicle and become confused about your own nature. And where in the sutra are you going to find the One Vehicle? I will tell you. The sutra says, ‘All buddhas and bhagavans only appear in the world for the greatest of reasons.’⁶⁴ So how is this teaching to be understood? And how is this teaching to be practiced? Listen, and I will tell you.

“For a person’s mind to be free of ideas and essentially empty, to be still and free of false views, this is the greatest of reasons—when you don’t get lost in the inside or on the outside, when you are free of dualities. If you get lost on the outside, you are attached to forms. If you get lost in the inside, you are attached to emptiness. To be free of form amid forms and free of emptiness amid emptiness, this is when you don’t get lost in the inside or on the outside. Once you understand this teaching, your mind will open in an instant.

“As for ‘appearing in the world,’ what is it that is produced in the mind? The understanding of a buddha is what is produced. *Buddha* means ‘enlightenment.’ And this can be divided into four phases: producing the understanding of enlightenment, manifesting the understanding of enlightenment, realizing the understanding of enlightenment, and conforming to the understanding of enlightenment. Producing, manifesting, realizing, and conforming all spring from one place, the understanding of enlightenment. When you see your own nature, you will ‘appear in the world.’”⁶⁵

The Master said, “Fada, I have always hoped that in their minds everyone in the world would produce the understanding of a buddha and not the understanding of an ordinary being. When people’s minds are deluded, in their ignorance they engage in evil and produce the understanding of an ordinary being. And when people’s minds are clear, they produce the light of wisdom and the understanding of a buddha. When you no longer produce the understanding of an ordinary being but the understanding of a buddha, you will ‘appear in the world.’”

The Master said, “Fada, this is the Lotus Sutra’s teaching of One Vehicle, which it divides into three for the sake of deluded people. But you should rely only on the One Vehicle.”

The Master said, “Fada, when your mind practices, it reads the Lotus. When it doesn’t practice, the Lotus does the reading. When your mind is true, it reads the Lotus. When your mind is false, the Lotus does the reading. When you produce the understanding of a buddha, you read the Lotus. When you produce the understanding of an ordinary being, the Lotus reads you.”

The Master said, “When you strive to practice in accordance with the Dharma, this is when you read the sutra.”

As Fada heard these words, he suddenly experienced a great realization. His eyes wet with tears, he said, “Master, I have never truly read the Lotus. For seven years I have been read by the sutra. In the future, when I read the Lotus, with each thought I shall practice the practice of a buddha.”

The Master said, “Who practices as a buddha is a buddha.” No one present on that occasion failed to experience an awakening.

Forty-three: A monk named Zhichang 智常 came to Mount Caoxi. After paying his respects to the Master, he asked about the meaning of the Four Vehicles.

Zhichang said, “The Buddha speaks of Three Vehicles, but he also talks about a Supreme Vehicle. Your disciple doesn’t understand this. I hope you will instruct me.”

Master Huineng said, “Look at your own mind, and don’t cling to the external attributes of dharmas. Originally there was no teaching concerning the Four Vehicles. But because people’s minds have four different capacities, the Dharma has Four Vehicles.

“Observing, listening, reading, and reciting make up the Small Vehicle. Becoming aware of dharmas and understanding their meaning make up the Middle Vehicle. Putting the Dharma into practice makes up the Great Vehicle. And being versed in all teachings and skilled in all practices, leaving nothing out, except the attributes of dharmas, and remaining free of attainments, this is what makes up the Supreme Vehicle. The Supreme Vehicle means the supreme practice. It isn’t something you discuss. You have to practice it yourself. Don’t ask me.”

Forty-four: There was a monk by the name of Shenhui 神會 who came to Mount Caoxi from Nanyang to pay his respects and asked, “When the Master meditates, does he see or not?”

The Master got up and hit Shenhui three times. Then he asked Shenhui, “When I hit you, did it hurt or not?”

Shenhui answered, “It hurt and it didn’t hurt.”

The Sixth Patriarch said, “Well, I see and I don’t see.”

Shenhui asked the Master, “What do you mean, you see and you don’t see?”

The Master said, “As for ‘I see,’ what I usually see are my own faults. So I say ‘I see.’ And as for ‘I don’t see,’ what I don’t see are the faults of others, either in this world or in the heavens. So I see and I don’t see. What do you mean, ‘It hurt and it didn’t hurt’?”

Shenhui answered, “If it didn’t hurt, I would be the same as a lifeless rock or stick. But if it hurt, I would be the same as an ordinary person and still subject to anger.”

The Master said, “Shenhui, your ‘do you see or not’ just now was dualistic, and your ‘it hurt and it didn’t hurt’ was samsaric.”⁶⁶ You don’t see your own nature, and yet you dare come here to play games.”

Shenhui bowed and dared not say more. The Master then said, “If you are too blind to see your own mind, ask a good friend to help you find a way. Only when you understand and see your own mind can you put the Dharma into practice. But you are too blind to see your own mind, and you have come here to ask me if I see or not. What I don’t know can’t take the place of your ignorance. And how can what you understand take the place of what I understand? Why don’t you work on yourself, then ask me if I see or not?”

Shenhui bowed and became a disciple. He didn’t leave Mount Caoxi and was always in attendance.”⁶⁷

Forty-five:⁶⁸ The Master later summoned his disciples Fahai 法海, Zhicheng 志誠, Fada 法達, Zhichang 智常, Zhitong 智同, Zhiche 志徹, Zhidao 志道, Fazhen 法珍, Faru 法汝, and Shenhui 神會. He said, “You ten disciples come closer. You are not like the others. After I pass into Nirvana, each of you will become a teacher in a different region. I will now teach you how to explain the Dharma without losing sight of its basic principle.

“Begin with the three classifications and make use of the thirty-six pairs. But avoid dualities when you do. Whenever you explain a teaching, don’t stray from its essence and attributes. Whenever someone asks about the Dharma, always speak in terms of pairs and hold up the opposite member. Since each depends on the other for its existence or nonexistence, when both are finally eliminated, there is nowhere to turn.

“The teaching of the three classifications includes the skandhas, the dhatus, and the ayatanas. The skandhas are the five skandhas, the dhatus are the eighteen dhatus, and the ayatanas are the twelve ayatanas.

“What do the five skandhas include? They include the skandha of form, the skandha of sensation, the skandha of perception, the skandha of memory, and the skandha of consciousness.

“What do the eighteen dhatus include? They include the six objects, the six gates, and the six forms of consciousness.

“What do the twelve ayatanas include? They include the six objects on the outside and the six gates on the inside. What do the six objects include? They include shape, sound, smell, taste, feeling, and thought. And what do the six gates include? They include the eyes, the ears, the nose, the tongue, the body, and the intellect.

“In addition to the six gates and six objects, our dharma nature gives rise to six forms of consciousness: visual, auditory, olfactory, gustatory, tactile, and conceptual. Because our nature includes ten thousand dharmas, we call it the ‘storehouse consciousness.’⁶⁹

“Whenever we think, we alter our consciousness and give birth to the six forms of consciousness, which leave through the six gates and encounter the six objects. These three sets of six make eighteen. When our nature is false, it gives birth to eighteen kinds of falsehood. When our nature is true, it gives birth to eighteen kinds of truth. Someone who uses them for evil is an ordinary being. Someone who uses them for good is a buddha. And where do they come from? From our nature.”

Forty-six: “As for the pairs of opposites, there are five external, inanimate pairs: heaven and earth, sun and moon, dark and light, yin 陰 and yang 陽, water and fire.

“Concerning language and the attributes of dharmas, there are twelve pairs: conditioned and unconditioned, material and immaterial, apparent and nonapparent, karmic and non-karmic, substantive and empty, moving and still, pure and defiled, mundane and holy, cleric and lay, old and young, long and short, high and low.

“Concerning functions arising from our nature, there are nineteen pairs: wrong and right, ignorant and learned, foolish and wise, agitated and calm, disciplined and wild, honest and deceitful, genuine and false, difficult and easy, afflicted and enlightened, kind and mean, joyful and angry, detached and possessive, progressive and backward, created and annihilated, permanent and impermanent, dharma body and physical body, manifestation body and realization body, substance and function, nature and attribute, animate and inanimate.⁷⁰

“Language and the attributes of dharmas include twelve pairs. External, inanimate dharmas include five pairs, and functions arising from our nature include nineteen pairs. Altogether they form thirty-six pairs. As long as you remain free of dualities, this teaching of thirty-six pairs can be used to explain every sutra. But how are you to use these thirty-six in regard to your own nature?

“When you talk externally—with others—remain free of appearances while among appearances. And internally, remain free of emptiness while amid emptiness. If you become attached to emptiness, you will only increase your ignorance. And if you become attached to appearances, you will only add to your mistaken views.

“There are those who slander the Dharma and say not to use words. But to say not to use words would mean we shouldn’t speak. Speech consists of words. You can say their nature is empty, but the nature of words about the truth is not empty. The deluded only confuse themselves when they get rid of language.

“Dark isn’t itself dark. It is due to light that it’s dark. And light isn’t itself light. It is due to dark that it’s light. Because light becomes dark, and dark becomes light, their appearance and disappearance depend on each other. The thirty-six pairs are all like this.”

Forty-seven: The Master said, “Henceforth, when you ten disciples teach the Dharma, pass down the teaching of the Platform Sutra without losing sight of its basic principle. Unless someone has been given the Platform Sutra, they don’t have my teaching. Now that you have received it, pass it on to later generations. To encounter the Platform Sutra is the same as to be taught by me personally.”

After these ten monks had been instructed, they copied the Platform Sutra and passed it on to later generations so that anyone who obtained it would be sure to see their nature.

Forty-eight: The Master passed into Nirvana on the third day of the eighth month in the second year of the Xiantian Era 先天二年 (713). On the eighth day of the seventh month, he called his disciples together to say goodbye. Previously, in the first year of the Xiantian Era, he had a stupa built in Xinzhou⁷¹ at Guo’en Temple 國恩寺. It

was there, in the seventh month of the following year, that he bid them farewell.

The Master said, "Everyone come closer. In the eighth month, I expect to leave this world. If any of you have questions, ask them now, and I will resolve them for you. Let me put an end to your delusions so that you can know peace and happiness. After I leave, I won't be here to teach you."

When Fahai and the other monks heard this, they wept and cried out. Only Shenhui was unmoved and shed no tears. The Sixth Patriarch said, "Shenhui is a young monk, but he understands that good and bad are the same and isn't moved by praise or blame. The rest of you don't understand. What exactly have you been cultivating all these years on this mountain? And who exactly are you crying for? Are you worried that I don't know where I am going? If I didn't know where I was going, I would never leave you. You are crying because you don't know where I am going. If you knew, you wouldn't be crying.

"Our nature isn't subject to birth or death, coming or going. All of you sit down. I have a poem for you: 'Truth and Falsehood, Movement and Stillness.' If any of you recite this poem, your thoughts will be the same as mine. Put this into practice, and don't lose sight of its basic principle."

The monks all bowed and asked the Master to recite his poem, which they received with great reverence. The poem went:

"Nothing that exists is true
don't think seeing makes it true
if you think you see what is true
such a view is utterly false
if you would possess what is true
the mind free of falsehood is true
unless your mind is free of falsehood
wherever you look nothing is true.

Living things know how to move
lifeless things don't move
those who practice staying still

resemble lifeless unmoving things
to see what truly doesn't move
in movement something doesn't move
what doesn't move doesn't move
dead things have no buddha seeds.

If you can see what appears clearly
the ultimate truth doesn't move
once you know how to see like this
this is how suchness functions
all you students of the Way
be relentless and concentrate
don't stand at the gate of the Mahayana
clinging to views about birth and death.

If the people you meet are ready
tell them what the Buddha meant
if they aren't truly ready
bow and tell them to be good
there is nothing to argue about in this teaching
those who argue lose sight of the Way
clinging to delusions arguing about teachings
they doom themselves to another round."

Forty-nine: Upon hearing and understanding what the Master meant, the monks no longer dared to engage in disputes but practiced in accordance with the Dharma. Knowing the Master did not have long to live, they all bowed. The venerable Fahai stepped forward and said, "Master, after you leave, to whom should your robe and Dharma be given?"

The Master said, "The Dharma has already been given. You don't need to ask about that. However, more than twenty years after my passing, false teachings will create confusion and misrepresent the principle of our school. Someone will then come forward with no concern for their own life and distinguish the true teachings of the Buddha from the false ones and raise high the principle of our school and my true Dharma."⁷²

“The robe isn’t meant to be passed on. If you don’t believe me, let me recite the ‘Transmission of the Robe and Dharma Songs’ of the previous five patriarchs. According to the Song of the First Patriarch, Bodhidharma, the robe isn’t meant to be passed on. Listen, and I’ll recite them for you:

‘The Song of the First Patriarch, Bodhidharma:
I came to the land of Tang
to teach and save deluded beings
a flower from which five petals unfold
a fruit that ripens naturally.

The Song of the Second Patriarch, Huike:
The first connection was the ground
planted in the ground is how a flower grows
if in the future there is no ground
where will a flower come from?

The Song of the Third Patriarch, Sengcan:
A flower seed needs a place to grow
in the ground is where a flower grows
but unless its seed is fertile
even in the ground it won’t grow.

The Song of the Fourth Patriarch, Daoxin:
As long as its seed is fertile
planted in the ground it will grow
but if conditions don’t come together
nothing at all will grow.

The Song of the Fifth Patriarch, Hongren:
A sentient being plants a seed
an insentient flower blooms
in the absence of sentient beings or seeds
the mind is just barren ground.

The Song of the Sixth Patriarch, Huineng:
If the ground of the mind includes beings and seeds

when the Dharma rains a flower grows
once you understand flowers beings and seeds
the fruit of enlightenment forms on its own.”

Fifty: Master Huineng said, “Listen to these two verses I’ve composed about the meaning of Bodhidharma’s song. If the deluded among you practice in accordance with them, you are sure to see your nature.

‘A false flower grows from the ground of the mind
five petals unfold from its stem
together creating primordial karma⁷³
their views at the mercy of karmic winds.

A true flower grows from the ground of the mind
five petals unfold from its stem
together practicing prajna wisdom
their enlightenment sure to follow.”

Once the Sixth Patriarch had finished reciting these verses, he dismissed the assembly. As his disciples left, they thought about this and realized the Master did not have long to live.

Fifty-one: The Sixth Patriarch lived until the third day of the eighth month. After the noon meal, the Master said, “All of you sit down. It’s time for me to leave you.”

Fahai asked, “From ancient times until now, how many generations have passed down the Dharma of this instantaneous teaching?”

The Sixth Patriarch said, “It was first passed down by the Seven Buddhas. Sakyamuni Buddha was the seventh, Mahakasyapa the eighth, Ananda the ninth, Madhyantika the tenth, Samakavasa the eleventh, Upagupta the twelfth, Dhritaka the thirteenth, Buddhanandi the fourteenth, Buddhamitra the fifteenth, Parsva the sixteenth, Punyayasas the seventeenth, Asvaghosa the eighteenth, Kapimala the nineteenth, Nagarjuna the twentieth, Kamadeva the twenty-first, Rahulata the twenty-second, Sanghanandi the twenty-third,

Gayasata the twenty-fourth, Kumarata the twenty-fifth, Jayata the twenty-sixth, Vasubandhu the twenty-seventh, Manorhita the twenty-eighth, Haklenayasas the twenty-ninth, Simha Bhiksu the thirtieth, Samavasa the thirty-first, Upagupta the thirty-second, Sangharaksa the thirty-third, Subhamitra the thirty-fourth, and Bodhidharma, the third son of a king in South India, was the thirty-fifth.

“In the kingdom of Tang, Huike was the thirty-sixth, Sengcan the thirty-seventh, Daoxin the thirty-eighth, Hongren the thirty-ninth, and now I am the fortieth to have received the Dharma.”

The Master said, “From now on, when you teach this to others, you will need a testament so you don’t lose sight of its basic principle.”

Fifty-two: Fahai spoke again, “As the Master is departing, what Dharma is he leaving behind so that future generations will be able to see a buddha?”

The Sixth Patriarch said, “Listen, if the deluded people of future generations can simply understand what a being is, they will be able to see a buddha. If they don’t understand what a being is, they can look for ten thousand kalpas and still not find a buddha. I will now tell you how to understand what a being is and how to see a buddha. I will also leave you with a verse called ‘The Liberation of Seeing the True Buddha.’ But those who are deluded won’t see a buddha, only those who are awake.”

Fahai said, “If we could hear this, it will be passed down from one generation to the next without fail.”

The Sixth Patriarch said, “Listen, and I will tell you. If people in future ages want to find a buddha, all they need to do is understand what a being is, and they will be able to understand what a buddha is. Buddhas are connected to beings. Apart from beings, there is no buddha mind.

‘Deluded a buddha is a being
awake a being is a buddha
ignorant a buddha is a being
wise a being is a buddha
selfish a buddha is a being

impartial a being is a buddha
once you create selfish thoughts
the buddha is inside a being
once you're awake and impartial
a being is a buddha
in my mind there's a buddha
this buddha is the real one
if I didn't have the buddha mind
where else would I find a buddha?"

Fifty-three: The Master said, "You disciples, be well. I will leave you with a poem called 'Liberation upon Seeing the Real Buddha of One's Own Nature.' If deluded people in future ages understand the meaning of this poem, they will see the real buddha of their own mind and nature. After I give you this poem, I will leave you:

'The pure nature of suchness is the true buddha
the three poisons of false views are the true mara
someone with wrong views has a mara in their home
someone with right views is visited by buddhas.

When the wrong views of your nature create the three poisons
the King of Maras makes himself at home
when right views suddenly drive the poisons from your mind
Mara becomes a buddha, a real one, not a false one.

Your transformation, realization, and dharma body
three bodies essentially one
search inside and this is what you will find
the cause of enlightenment and buddhahood.

From the transformation body your pure nature rises
your pure nature dwells in the transformation body
it directs the transformation body down the noble path
where future perfection is inexhaustible.

The nature of defilement is the cause of purity
without defilement there is no pure body

just keep your nature free of the five desires
the moment you see it is when it is real.

If this life you understand the instant teaching
the moment you do a buddha will appear before you
if you keep looking for a buddha in your practice
where will you find one that is real.

If you could discover something real in your body
something real would be the cause of buddhahood
don't look for a buddha beyond what is real
those who do are great fools.

The instant teaching came from the West
if you're hoping to be saved you need to practice
I'm telling you students of the Way in the world
don't end up becoming do-nothings.”

After he finished reciting this poem, the Master told his disciples, “Be well. I am leaving you now. After I'm gone, don't engage in the worldly customs of crying or accepting condolence money or wearing mourning garments. That would not be the Buddhist Way, and you would not be my disciples. Act the same as if I were here. Sit together in meditation, but remain free of movement and stillness, birth and death, coming and going, right and wrong, present and past. Be quiet and unperturbed. That is the Great Way. After I am gone, simply practice in accordance with the Dharma, the same as when I was with you. If I were here, and you disobeyed my teaching, even my presence would be of no help.”

After he said this, the Master spoke no more. During the third watch of the night, he passed away peacefully. He was seventy-six years of age.

Fifty-four: The day the Master passed into Nirvana, the monastery⁷⁴ was filled with a wonderful fragrance that lasted for days. The earth shook, and there were landslides, trees bloomed white, the sun and moon dimmed, and the clouds lost their color.

The Master passed into Nirvana on the third day of the eighth month, and in the eleventh month his casket was received at Mount Caoxi. After he was interred inside a dragon urn, a bright light shone forth and illuminated the sky above it for three days before it faded. Magistrate Wei Qu of Shaozhou erected a memorial stele where offerings are still made today.

Fifty-five: This Platform Sutra was compiled by the venerable Fahai. Before he died, he gave it to his fellow disciple, Daoji 道際. And before Daoji died, he gave it to his disciple, Wuzhen 悟真. Wuzhen currently lives in Lingnan at Faxing Monastery 法興寺 on Mount Caoxi, where he still transmits this teaching.⁷⁵

Fifty-six: If this teaching is passed on, it must be to someone of superior wisdom who deeply believes the teaching of the Buddha. There are still those today who base themselves on its great compassion and who accept this sutra as their authority.

Fifty-seven: This monk⁷⁶ is a native of Shaozhou's Qujiang County 曲將縣. After the Buddha entered Nirvana / his teaching spread to Eastern lands / transmitted to all as detachment / detachment from the ego-mind. / This is the true bodhisattva doctrine / a true example of its practice / only taught to those with wisdom / who explain it to liberate fools. / Only those transmit this teaching / who vow to put it into practice / who don't retreat from difficulties / who are able to endure hardships / who are rich in blessings and merit.⁷⁷ If someone's capacity should be inadequate or their ability insufficient, though they might seek this teaching, they cannot possibly penetrate it, and it would be a mistake to give them the Platform Sutra. Let this be known to all fellow practitioners that they might fathom its deeper meaning.

Addendum

For my translations, I have used the standard Sanskrit texts of the Heart and Diamond Sutras, but for the Platform, I have used the Chinese copy found at Dunhuang 敦煌 in 1935. It was given a tentative date of 780, the same date as another Dunhuang copy brought back to the British Museum in 1908. Since the ordering of material in these two copies differs from the later Zongbao 宗寶 edition of 1291 enshrined in the Chinese Buddhist canon on which most other translations are based, I've added a cross-referencing list. Dunhuang sections 38, 50, 55, 56, and 57 are missing in the Zongbao edition. For material in the Zongbao edition missing in the Dunhuang copies, I have indicated that with an x. The missing material can all be found in my earlier translation of the Platform Sutra published by Counterpoint in 2006.

Chapter One: 1, 2, 3, x, 4, 5, 6, x, 7, 8, 9, x, 10, 11, x, 12

Chapter Two: 12, 24, 25, 26, 27, 28, 29, 30, 31, 32, 36, 37

Chapter Three: 34, 35, 36, 37

Chapter Four: 12, 13, 15, 14, 16, 17

Chapter Five: 18, 19

Chapter Six: x, 22, 21, 23, 20, 33, 37

Chapter Seven: x, 42, x, 43, x

Chapter Eight: 39, x, 40, 41, x, 44

Chapter Nine: x

Chapter Ten: 45, 46, 48, 49, 47, 49, x, 51, 52, 53, 54, x

Notes

Introduction

1. Life is suffering, the cause of suffering is desire, desire can be eliminated, and the way to eliminate it is by following the Eightfold Path: right views, right thought, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right perseverance, right reflection, right meditation.
2. The 1,300 short Sanskrit sutras of the Samyukta Agama are examples of this approach to instruction. Similar Pali texts make up the Samyutta Nikaya.
3. For more on merit, see the Platform Sutra 34.
4. For more on the alaya and tathagata-garbha, see the Lankavatara Sutra XXXVIII and LXXXII.
5. See section 35, but also 20 and 45.
6. The Three Pillars are morality, meditation, and wisdom.

The Heart Sutra

1. Sanskrit for “master of looking down from on high.”
2. Form, sensation, perception, memory, consciousness.
3. Buddha’s disciple and compiler of Abhidharma texts.
4. This is a three-step example of set theory: sets A and B intersect, set A equals set B, all possible set As are equal to all possible set Bs.
5. The Twelve Ayatanas or Abodes.
6. The Eighteen Dhatus or Elements.

7. The Twelve Nidanas or Links: ignorance, memory, consciousness, name-and-form, senses, contact, feeling, craving, grasping, becoming, birth, old age and death.
8. The Four Truths and the Eightfold Path.
9. *Mahavidya* means “great (esoteric) knowledge or awareness.” It also refers to incantations associated with certain goddesses as well as to the goddesses themselves.
10. “Into the gone, into the gone, into the gone beyond, into the gone completely beyond, enlightenment, amen!”

The Diamond Sutra

1. The Buddha was often joined by the 1,250 followers of five men he had converted early in his career.
2. The Sanskrit for offering is *pinda*, which refers to anything made of parts, from a ball of rice to a world (see section 30).
3. Subhuti followed the sravaka path of early Buddhism with its focus on the renunciation of desire and attainment of nirvana. The word *sravaka* means “hearer” and refers to those who actually heard the Buddha teach.
4. Epithets used to refer to the Buddha included *bhagavan*, “bestower of prosperity,” *sugata*, “well gone,” *tathagata*, “thus gone,” and *arhan* or arhat, “free of rebirth.”
5. Bodhisattvas are not listed in any edition of this text, but we learn at the end of this sutra that lay residents of Sravasti were also present. Hence, these must be the “bodhisattvas” to whom Subhuti is referring and on behalf of whom he addresses the Buddha.
6. The “best of blessings” refers to the Buddha’s example and the “greatest of trusts” to his teaching.
7. The goals of the bodhisattva path are enlightenment and the liberation of others, in contrast to the freedom from desire and nirvana of the sravaka path.
8. Subhuti appears interested in the bodhisattva path, but his questions are those of a sravaka, hoping to suppress desire.
9. The Buddha’s solution is homeopathic rather than allopathic: you don’t control your thoughts, you transform them, which you do by vowing to liberate others.

10. The vow creates a path that isn't a path for beings who aren't beings.
11. The practice of charity is the first of the paramitas. The sutra begins with alms but focuses on the gift of liberation.
12. The "body of merit" (*punya-skandha*—not *punya-samcaya*, or "pile of merit") is created by a bodhisattva's selfless vow. It was also called sambhoga-kaya (body of realization) and was one of every buddha's three bodies. The original meaning of *skandha* was "tree trunk" or "pillar," and it was the word Jains used to refer to the body of an individual.
13. Buddhas acquire thirty-two physical attributes that distinguish their nirmana-kaya, or manifestation body. The Buddha, however, is asking about the sambhoga-kaya, or realization body, created by the vow to liberate all beings.
14. Subhuti understands that the subjects addressed by the Buddha—and he thinks the Buddha is referring to his visible body—are granted no more reality than the illusoriness words bestow. As the Lankavatara Sutra (II.3) might put it, "a statement about x is a statement about 'no x.'"
15. Subhuti needs new eyes. It turns out the body the Buddha is referring to is the "body of merit," or sambhoga-kaya, which is visible, but, being free of attributes, only to buddhas and those near the end of the bodhisattva path.
16. The teaching is over but not the sutra. Subhuti wonders if such a teaching will be understood by those to come.
17. Early Buddhists assumed people in the future would be less spiritually capable or inclined and envisioned a sequence of four five-hundred-year stages. The last stage ended four hundred years ago, which explains a lot.
18. Because it was initially used for lions and elephants and only later for those who shared their courage, I've translated the term *mahasattva* (great being) as "fearless."
19. Realization also requires good karma—especially to meet a teacher or a teaching. Hence the importance of meritorious words, deeds, and thoughts.
20. This refers to a bodhisattva's first experience of the "body of merit." The Sanskrit term *prasada* was often used in reference to

the serenity and confidence the Buddha felt when he saw his first monk and resolved to leave home.

21. What the Buddha knows and sees is the body he shares with those who have vowed to liberate all beings. Such a vow is free of conceptions. Hence, the body that results is free of attributes.
22. Sravakas see dharmas as real; bodhisattvas see them as expedient means, rafts for crossing the endless sea of existence. “No dharma” lacks such usefulness, as it doesn’t lead to liberation.
23. The dharma realized by a buddha’s sambhoga-kaya and taught by a buddha’s nirmana-kaya and referred to as “unexcelled, perfect enlightenment” is the dharma-kaya, a buddha’s third, and only real, body.
24. Subhuti’s understanding is that of a sravaka and rests on what became known as the Abhidharma: reality seen as a matrix of dharmas, among which three were considered unconditioned: space and two kinds of nirvana. Subhuti thinks the Buddha’s enlightenment arose from these. The Buddha corrects his understanding in the next section.
25. The seven treasures include gold, silver, aquamarine, carnelian, nacre, crystal, and coral.
26. Subhuti’s understanding is limited here to the teaching of emptiness, that whatever is pointed to is only real in the sense that it is being pointed to.
27. The earliest form of the Diamond Sutra was said to have been in verse. Of the three hundred four-line verses that comprised the original, only three remain.
28. Any limits to the sambhoga-kaya, or body of realization, dissolve when this teaching is shared with others. It is from this that the nirmana-kaya of buddhahood is born, not from the uncreated, unconditioned dharmas of space or nirvana.
29. The teaching gives rise to realization (the sambhoga-kaya) and the teacher (the nirmana-kaya). The teaching itself (the dharma-kaya) is no teaching. Thus are the dharmas of a buddha to be viewed as “no dharmas.”
30. Having responded to Subhuti’s question about the bodhisattva path, the Buddha turns to the sravaka path Subhuti had followed

up until then, the first stage of which was to realize impermanence—hence, the river metaphor.

31. The goal of the sravaka path was to escape the round of rebirth by becoming free from desire. The *srotapanna* (who finds the river), the *agamin* (who returns once more), the *anagamin* (who returns no more), and the *arhan* or arhat (free from rebirth) marked its four stages.
32. Free of desire, Subhuti has reached the final goal of the sravaka path, no rebirth. Despite his apparent interest in the bodhisattva path, nonattachment is the best he can do.
33. The Buddha contrasts the final stage of his own career with Subhuti's. While Subhuti obtained freedom from rebirth, it was in the presence of Dipamkara Buddha that Sakyamuni achieved the acceptance of non-arising (*anutpattika-dharma-ksanti*)—the ability to accept and bear the truth that nothing arises. The sravaka path begins with the realization that everything is impermanent. The final stage of the bodhisattva path begins with the realization and acceptance that nothing arises in the first place; hence, nothing ceases. Impermanence is a fiction.
34. The first attainment following such realization is the transformation of one's world.
35. Kumarajiva's Chinese rendering of this line has become a touchstone of Zen: 應無所住而生其心.
36. The Sanskrit for "person" is *purusa*. In ancient Indian lore, Purusa was the name of the cosmic being who sacrificed his body to create all living creatures.
37. A bodhisattva's second attainment is a perfect body.
38. Sumeru is the mountain at the center of every world.
39. The Sanskrit text has *atma-bhava* for "bodily existence."
40. Just as Purusa created all beings by the sacrifice of his body, a bodhisattva's sambhoga-kaya (body of merit or of realization) is created by the vow to liberate all beings. The full realization of that body, however, does not occur until one is near the end of the bodhisattva path, which in the Buddha's case was when he met Dipamkara.
41. The Sanskrit *caitya* refers to a place made holy by the presence of a teacher's remains, a tree, a spring, or a text.

42. The term *pra-jna* means “before knowledge.” Depending on how one parses *paramita*, as derived from *parama* it means “perfection,” as a combination of *param* and *ita* it means “transcendent”—what leads beyond.
43. The division of this sutra into thirty-two sections to mirror the Buddha’s material body was the work of Prince Zhaoming 昭明 (501–531), son of Emperor Wu 梁武帝.
44. Anything that is a part or made of parts has no self-existence. This is not only true of worlds and specks of dust but also bodies and attributes.
45. The sutra ups the ante of the material gift, from the seven treasures to one’s own body. A buddha’s sambhoga-kaya is not based on sacrifice or renunciation but on realization—you can’t sacrifice or renounce what you don’t have.
46. The perfection of acceptance (*ksanti*) is the third paramita. The sutra focuses on three of the six—the gift of liberation, the acceptance of non-arising, and the wisdom of nonattachment. The other three—morality, devotion, and meditation—are all present at the beginning.
47. Attributes are seen as no attributes.
48. The gift, again, is the gift of liberation.
49. Anyone who vows to liberate all beings thereby shares the same body of realization, the same sambhoga-kaya, as the Buddha. Thus, the Buddha knows, sees, and is aware of them.
50. Sacrificing one’s life is considered the ultimate form of charity but still doesn’t compare with transmission of this text. Writing out such a text, or paying someone to do so, was seen as a way to earn merit. Many of the early copies we have today had their origin in this practice.
51. Beneath the same robe of enlightenment worn by the Buddha, practitioners share the same sambhoga-kaya, or body of merit, the same realization. This sentence is missing in the earliest extant Sanskrit texts but is present in all Chinese translations.
52. The Buddha repeats his earlier response but changes the focus to the giver of the gift and the bodhisattva’s nonattachment to the path.

53. The Buddha focuses here on the bodhisattva, the nature of the body of realization, and the powers of realization.
54. Here, *posa* (“individuality”) replaces *sattva* (“being”) in the standard list (see section 3).
55. Again, the two attainments of a bodhisattva are a perfect body and the transformation of a world—here, reversed.
56. The physical eye sees grains of sand, the divine eye the grains of sand in as many rivers as there are grains of sand, the prajna eye as many beings as there are grains of sand, the dharma eye their streams of thought, and the buddha eye their thoughts as no thoughts.
57. The Buddha doesn’t speak falsely (see section 14), but only of what isn’t real.
58. No body, no parts.
59. No teacher, no teaching, no one taught.
60. Nothing realized, nothing to realize.
61. Auspicious dharmas are those that promote liberation. Only those free of self and other qualify.
62. What distinguishes a fool is belief in a self.
63. A universal king (*cakra-vartin*) also acquires the thirty-two attributes of a buddha. Hence, attributes do not make a buddha.
64. The Buddha returns to the question he asked Subhuti in section 5, “Can you see me now?” Among a buddha’s thirty-two attributes are a perfect physique and a melodious voice.
65. The Dharma (and a buddha’s dharma body) alone is real, but being real, it can’t be known.
66. A buddha’s physical manifestation is the concomitant not the cause of buddhahood.
67. Nothing gained and nothing lost. The reference is to the sravaka’s quest for nirvana.
68. The Buddha returns to what prompted the question that began this sutra: the Buddha’s daily begging round.
69. The text here contrasts a pile (*samcaya*) of atoms and a body (*skandha*) of merit. In ancient India, two billion atoms (*paramanu*) were thought to comprise a fingertip.
70. The Buddha only speaks of what isn’t real.

71. The word *pinda* (“entity”) also began this sutra, but as a ball of rice.
72. Again, the Buddha only speaks of what isn’t real, especially when it’s something to which we’re attached.

The Platform Sutra

1. Still extant, it is now called Dajian Temple 大鑒寺.
2. The teaching that everything is empty of self-existence. This is also the title of the collection of sixteen sutras of which the Diamond was the ninth.
3. The purpose of this talk was to confer the precepts, and for such ceremonies an ordination platform was used. See sections 20–23.
4. South of Beijing.
5. Meaning “South of the Ridges,” thus Guangdong and Guangxi provinces.
6. Xinzhou (now Xinxing 新興) was 150 kilometers west of Guangzhou. Nanhai was a nearby market center, but it was also a name for Guangzhou.
7. Across the Yangzi from Jiujiang 九江 and fifteen kilometers north of Huangmei 黃梅.
8. According to the Chuandenglü 傳燈錄 5, this happened in 671.
9. The characters 獠 (ge-liao) both have the “dog” radical and were used by Han Chinese when referring to members of the hill tribes of South China.
10. The teaching that all beings have the potential to become buddhas was introduced by the Lotus Sutra, which was first translated into Chinese in 286.
11. “Dharma” here refers to a teacher’s personal teaching or that of his lineage, which is shared only with those worthy of receiving it.
12. Only senior monks had their own rooms. These were dorm rooms.
13. The monk in charge of preparing novices for ordination.
14. The mention of scenes refers to Bodhiruci’s translation (513), not Gunabhadra’s (443), as his did not include the visually rich first chapter.

15. A small, round bronze mirror set in some kind of stand is meant. Made of bronze, such mirrors tarnished quickly.
16. A string of one thousand coins was worth fifty dollars in the Tang.
17. Section 5.
18. The presence here of “either” (亦 *yì*) in all editions would seem to refer to Shenxiu’s poem as well and belie the earlier praise.
19. The ferry was sixty kilometers from the monastery. Jiujiang was on the Yangzi’s south shore.
20. From Jiujiang, Huineng would have followed the Gan River 贛江 to its source just below this ridge. Shaoguan, where this sutra was spoken ten years later, was another 150 kilometers southwest, Guangzhou another 200.
21. Buddhism’s three pillars are meditation, wisdom, and morality. This talk was given to confer all three in the form of formless precepts.
22. Birth, duration, change, and death.
23. Samadhi refers to the merging of subject and object during meditation. “One Practice” refers to meditation and wisdom as inseparable.
24. Vimalakirti Sutra 4 and 1, respectively.
25. Vimalakirti Sutra 3.
26. Vimalakirti Sutra 1.
27. Vimalakirti Sutra 3.
28. Also known as the Brahma Net Sutra.
29. The first step on the Eightfold Path.
30. For “ulcerous hate” 疽疾, the Zongbao edition has “jealousy” 嫉妒.
31. Referring to what is being chanted: Maha Prajnaparamita.
32. Desire, anger, and ignorance are the three poisons that infect the mind and result in yet another existence.
33. “Suchness” or “reality” are translations of the Chinese *zhen-ru* 真如, or the Sanskrit *bhutatathata*.
34. A term for Asia coined by Indian Buddhists.
35. Referring to the Diamond Sutra.
36. The same two quotes appear here in 19.
37. Huineng considers “studying the Way” and “contemplating the mind” as prone to becoming dualistic dead ends that objectify

one's practice.

38. The Buddhist canon, or Tripitaka, is divided according to twelve styles or subjects: sutras, sastras, jatakas, etc.
39. For Huineng's use of "mind" and "nature," see 35.
40. The "thieves" refer to the powers of sensation, the "gates" to the organs or faculties of sensation, and the "objects" to sensations.
41. Huineng uses "dharma nature" to refer to our alaya consciousness and "buddha nature" to refer to the tathagata-garbha.
42. Amita, or Amitabha, is the buddha of the Western Paradise, where those who chant that buddha's name with a clear mind are reborn.
43. The city in India where the Buddha spoke the Shorter Manifestation of Paradise Sutra 阿彌陀經, not to mention the Diamond Sutra.
44. He says this in the Visualization of Paradise Sutra 觀無量壽佛經.
45. He says this in the Shorter Manifestation of Paradise Sutra.
46. Vimalakirti Sutra 1.
47. Murder, theft, adultery, falsehood, slander, gossip, profanity, avarice, anger, and delusion.
48. Wrong views, wrong thoughts, wrong speech, wrong behavior, wrong livelihood, wrong effort, wrong mindfulness, and wrong meditation, in contrast to the eight right ways of the Eightfold Path.
49. The noncommittal of the ten evil deeds.
50. The Chinese 無生 ("non-arising") is a translation of the Sanskrit *anutpattika*. The acceptance of non-arising marks the eighth stage of the bodhisattva path.
51. These two bodhisattvas welcome devotees to the Western Paradise.
52. The next buddha after Sakyamuni.
53. Mount Sumeru is ringed by nine oceans and nine mountain ranges.
54. The three walls of the mind are karma, passion, and delusion.
55. The reference is to "leaving home" to become a monk or nun.
56. When Huineng isn't speaking, the voice is that of his disciple, Fahai.

57. Or thirty-two more years after the Platform Sutra was spoken.
58. Located sixty kilometers northeast of the Yangzi River town of Yichang 宜昌. It isn't really in North China, but it's not in South China.
59. A journey of nine hundred kilometers, much of which could have been by boat.
60. This touchstone of the Southern school is quoted from such sastras as Nagarjuna's Maha Prajnaparamita Sastra 大智度論 (see also Platform 26).
61. A pun on Fada's name: *fa* (dharma) and *da* (to understand).
62. It would have taken all day to read the entire sutra. Fada must have limited himself to the sections that puzzled him.
63. In the Lotus Sutra 3, the sravaka, pratyekabuddha, and bodhisattva vehicles are represented by a goat cart, a deer cart, and an ox cart.
64. Lotus Sutra 2.
65. The Lotus says "appear in the world" 出現於世. But Huineng shortens the phrase here to 出世, which could also be read as shorthand for "to transcend the world while in the world" 於世出世.
66. The basis of birth and death, what turns the Wheel.
67. Shenhui became a major force in defending the Southern school of Zen against attacks by the Northern school.
68. Sections 38–44 were compiled long after the initial talk. From this point on, the rest is a record of Huineng's last days, or thirty-two years later.
69. The alaya, or eighth form of consciousness, for which see the Lankavatara IV, IX, XIX, and LXXXII. Huineng doesn't include the seventh form, manas consciousness.
70. There are twenty, not nineteen, pairs here. Later editions deleted the last three and replaced them with "compassion and ill-will" 慈毒 and "long and short" 長短.
71. This was Huineng's hometown. Members of some of the hill tribes in South China still prepare their own coffins in advance. So why not a stupa?
72. Referring to the Discourse on Determining Right and Wrong 定是非論, written by Shenhui in 732 in answer to critiques of the

Northern school.

- 73. For someone who was supposedly illiterate, it's surprising to see a term unique to a philosophical treatise like The Awakening of Faith 起信論.
- 74. This took place at Guo'en Monastery in his hometown of Xinzhou.
- 75. This section is clearly by someone other than Fahai.
- 76. Referring to Fahai, the disciple who recorded the first part of the sutra and edited the remainder.
- 77. The first part of this section is in rhymed verse.

COUNTERPOINTS

- 1 *Think Little* by Wendell Berry
- 2 *Tawny Grammar* by Gary Snyder
- 3 *The Sayings of Jesus* translated by Guy Davenport and Benjamin Urrutia
- 4 *The Rock* by Wallace Stevens
- 5 *Lifting Belly* by Gertrude Stein
- 6 *Why I Am Not Going to Buy a Computer* by Wendell Berry
- 7 *Three Zen Sutras* translated by Red Pine

THREE ZEN SUTRAS

English translation copyright © 2021 by Red Pine
First Counterpoint edition: 2021

All rights reserved under International and Pan-American Copyright Conventions.
No part of this book may be used or reproduced in any manner whatsoever without
written permission from the publisher, except in the case of brief quotations
embodied in critical articles and reviews.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Huineng, 638–713. | Red Pine, 1943– translator, writer of added
commentary.

Title: Three Zen Sutras : The Heart Sutra, The Diamond Sutra, and The Platform
Sutra / translated by Red Pine.

Other titles: Liuzu da shi fa bao tan jing. English. | Tripiṭaka. Sūtrapīṭaka.
Prajñāparamita. Hṛdaya. English.

Description: New York : Counterpoint Press, 2021.

Identifiers: LCCN 2021013833 | ISBN 9781640094949 (paperback) | ISBN
9781640094956 (ebook)

Subjects: LCSH: Tripiṭaka. Sūtrapīṭaka. Prajñāparamita. Hṛdaya—Commentaries. |
Tripiṭaka. Sūtrapīṭaka. Prajñāparamita. Vajracchedikā—Commentaries. | Zen
Buddhism—Early works to 1800.

Classification: LCC BQ1882.E5 R46 2021 | DDC 294.3/82—dc23

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2021013833>

Series design by Jenny Carrow

Cover design by Sarah Brody

Book design by Jordan Koluch

COUNTERPOINT

2560 Ninth Street, Suite 318
Berkeley, CA 94710

www.counterpointpress.com