

Chinul (1158–1210)

On Cultivating the Mind (excerpts)

Chinul, one of the most important figures in Korean Buddhism, worked both to reform the Buddhist monastic order by recentering it in Zen meditation practice, and to give Zen meditation itself a philosophical and doctrinal basis derived from the sutras.

Chinul was sickly as a child, and his father vowed that if his son's health improved he would have him ordained as a monk. The boy accordingly entered a Zen monastery when he was seven and was ordained at the age of fifteen. He does not seem to have had a permanent teacher or ever to have received transmission in a lineage, displaying rather a penchant for self-reliance and seclusion and developing his practice using the sutras and the works of Chinese Zen Masters as guidelines. It was when he was reading a passage from the Platform Sutra on the freedom and self-reliance of true nature that he had his first enlightenment experience. Later, while searching the Hua-yen Sutra for a passage confirming the approach of Zen, he had a profound awakening when he read: "As one particle of dust contains thousands of sutras, so the wisdom of all Buddhas is complete in the bodies of ordinary people who do not realize it." Much of Chinul's later writing aims at reconciling Hua-yen philosophy with Zen practice.

In 1188, Chinul assembled a group of fellow meditators called the Concentration and Wisdom Community. Ten years later the community had attracted such a large following that Chinul had to relocate it. The site he chose, on Songgwang Mountain, developed into one of the most important monasteries in Korea. There Chinul introduced a method of Zen meditation, derived from the Chinese Zen Master Ta-hui (1089–1163; see Chapter 14), known as hwa-du (Chinese: hua-t'ou) practice. Hwa-du means "word-head" and signifies the meditation technique of silently observing a brief phrase that sums up the essential point of a kōan. Due largely to the influence of Chinul, hwa-du practice became the standard form of Zen meditation in Korea.

On Cultivating the Mind, written in 1205 and excerpted here, presents Chinul's urgent recommendation to practice meditation in the context of

sudden awakening and gradual cultivation, together with his belief in the inherent possession of the luminous mind by all human beings.

Revealing Truth through Suffering

The three worlds are burning with suffering like a house on fire. How long can we endure this? The best way to escape the wheel of suffering is to seek Buddhahood, but before you seek Buddhahood you should know that Buddha is nothing but your own mind. Do not look for your mind far away: it is within this body of yours.

The physical body does not truly exist; it is subject to birth and death. But true mind is like empty space, infinite and indestructible. Therefore, it is said:

The hundred bones will crumble
And return to fire and wind.
But one thing is eternally clear,
Embracing heaven and earth.

Confused Practice Cannot Help

It is sad that people have been confused for so long. They do not understand that their own minds are Buddha and that their own natures are Dharma. They look for Dharma by searching out sages far away. They look for Buddha but do not observe their own minds.

If they aspire to Buddhahood while clinging to their opinion that Buddha is outside the mind and that Dharma is outside their own nature, then even if they burn their limbs and break their bones for a million kalpas to show their sincerity, even if they sit constantly and never lie down to sleep, write out sutras in their own blood, eat only one meal a day, and practice every austerity—it would be like trying to cook rice by boiling sand, and in the end they will only wear themselves out.

The Same Enlightenment for Sages and Ordinary Beings

If you see the nature of your mind, gates to the Dharma as countless as grains of sand in the Ganges will open, and limitless subtle meanings will make themselves known. The World-Honored One saw this and said, “Sentient beings everywhere are all endowed with the wisdom and virtue of a Tathagata.” And also, “The various illusory forms that sentient beings take all come

from the Tathagata's perfect enlightenment." And so it is clear that Buddhahood cannot be attained apart from the mind. All the Buddhas of the past were simply ordinary people who understood their minds. Likewise, all the masters of the present have simply cultivated their own minds. And all future practitioners will have to depend upon cultivation of mind. So if you wish to follow the Way, do not seek for it outside yourself.

The nature of mind is without blemish.
It is originally whole and complete.
If you leave behind delusory karma
You will be Buddha just as you are.

The One Thing Is within Us But We Do Not See It

Student: If Buddha-nature is present now within the body, it is not separate from ordinary people. Then why can't I see it? Would you please explain this more?

Chinul: It is present within your body; you just don't see it. Who is it exactly who feels hungry and thirsty during the day, feels hot and cold, angry and happy? The body is a temporary compound of four elements: earth, water, fire, and wind. Matter itself is lifeless and insentient, so how can it see, hear, feel, and be conscious? But seeing, hearing, feeling, and being conscious are exactly your Buddha-nature. This is why Lin-chi said:

This corpse's four elements
Cannot speak or hear Dharma.
Empty space
Cannot speak or hear Dharma.
Only the formless thing before your eyes,
Clear and bright of itself,
Can speak and hear Dharma.

This thing without any form is the Dharma-seal of all Buddhas. It is your original mind.

Sudden Enlightenment and Gradual Cultivation

Student: If enlightenment is by its very nature sudden, why is gradual cultivation necessary? And if cultivation is necessarily gradual, how can we talk about sudden enlightenment? Would you please clear up our doubts about sudden enlightenment and gradual cultivation?

Chinul: First, then, sudden enlightenment. If you are an ordinary person, you mistakenly believe that your real body is the four elements and that your deluded thoughts are your mind. You do not understand that your self-nature is the Dharma-body, and that your own luminous mind is the Buddha. As you wander around looking for the Buddha outside your mind, a wise mentor might point out to you the entry point. If in one moment of thought you then turn the light around and see your original nature, you will realize that it is free from all delusion and is fundamentally complete. You will see that you are not a bit different from all the Buddhas. This is why enlightenment is called sudden.

Now, gradual cultivation. Even after you have realized that your original nature is no different from that of the Buddhas, you still have to deal with the energy of your beginningless habits, which cannot be eliminated all of a sudden. So you must continue to practice after enlightenment until gradually your efforts reach completion and you conceive a spiritual embryo. Then, after a long time, you may become a sage.

It is just like when a newborn baby arrives, perfectly endowed with all its faculties but still weak. It will take many months and years before it is a mature adult.

Looking for Techniques for Awakening Is Wrong

Student: What technique can we use to reflect inward and awaken to our self-nature in one moment of thought?

Chinul: Self-nature is just your own mind. Why do you need some technique? If you look for a technique to see your mind, you are like someone who because he cannot see his own eyes thinks that he doesn't have any eyes and so looks for another way to see. But he does have eyes, and how could he see except with his own eyes? If he realizes that he never lost his eyes, that is the same as seeing his eyes. Then there is no notion that he cannot see, or of finding some other way to see.

It's the same with spiritual awareness. It's just your own mind. How else could you understand?

If you look for your mind,
You cannot find it.
See that it cannot be found,
And you will see self-nature.

Direct Apprehension of the Luminous Mind

Student: A person of superior faculties will get this right away. But those of us who are just average will still have some doubts. Could you describe some methods for those who are confused about how to get enlightenment?

Chinul: The Way has nothing to do with knowing or not knowing. Just get rid of the mind that clings to delusion and wants enlightenment. Listen to this:

Each and every existent
Is like a dream, like a phantom.
Deluded thoughts are originally calm;
The sensory world is originally empty.

Where everything is empty, luminous awareness is not obscured, and this empty, calm, luminous mind is your original face. It is also the Dharma-seal transmitted in direct succession by all the Buddhas, Patriarchs, and enlightened beings of the past, present, and future. If you awaken to this mind, there are no steps in between, no stairs to climb. You go directly to the stage of Buddha, and with each step you transcend the three worlds. You will return home, all doubts resolved. Filled with both compassion and wisdom, you will become the teacher of Heaven and Earth. It will be as if gods and humans offered you thousands of gold coins every day, with the promise of more. You will indeed have finished the great work of life and death.

—Translation by Stanley Lombardo