

## “The Mind Is Buddha”

Pojo Chinul's *Secrets on Cultivating the Mind*

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Pojo Chinul (1158–1210) is one of the most influential figures in Korean Zen Buddhism. Chinul's Zen is characterized by *huatou* (or “a critical phrase”) meditation, a version of the encounter dialogue (Chin. *gong'an*; Kor. *kongan*; Jap. *kōan*) method. At the basis of Chinul's *huatou* meditation, also known as Kanhua Zen, lies his philosophy of mind. By tracing Chinul's account of mind, one can gain an understanding of the evolution of his thought, which can be broadly divided into three stages. The first stage deals with Chinul's expositions on the mind itself as they appear in his early works, including *Secrets on Cultivating the Mind* (*Susim kyōl*, c. 1203–5) and *Straight Talk on the True Mind* (*Chinsim chiksōl*, c. 1205). In the second stage, Chinul employs Huayan Buddhist doctrines to enhance his position on the nature of the mind of sentient beings and discusses the relationship between the subject and the outside world. The posthumous publication *Treatise on the Complete and Sudden Attainment of Buddhahood* (*Wōndon songbul ron*, 1210) is the best exposition of Chinul's Huayan thought and its relation to the mind of the sentient being. The third and final stage appears in his *Treatise on Resolving Doubts about Huatou Meditation* (*Kanhwa kyōrui ron*, 1210). In this work, Chinul proposes *huatou* meditation as the most effective way to invoke the realization of one's true mind.

At the very beginning of his early work *Encouragement to Practice: The Compact of the Samādhi and Prajñā Community* (*Kwōnsu chōnghye kyōlsa mun*, 1190), Chinul says, “When one is deluded about the mind and gives rise to endless defilements, such a person is a sentient being. When one is

awakened to the mind and gives rise to endless marvelous functions, such a person is the Buddha. Delusion and awakening are two different states but both are caused by the mind. If one tries to find the Buddha away from this mind, one will never find it.”<sup>1</sup> By identifying the mind with the Buddha and one's original nature, Chinul joins many other Zen masters for whom the identity between the Buddha and the sentient being in her or his original state marks the basic premise of the school.

In *Secrets on Cultivating the Mind*, an excerpt of which is translated here, Chinul argues that “Buddha is the mind.” That is, not only are the mind of the sentient being and that of the Buddha identical, but the mind itself is the Buddha. What would it mean to say that the mind is Buddha? Chinul advises that if one realizes the “pure” nature of one's mind, one will be “‘such’ like the Buddha.” The “such” is an articulation of ineffability, and the ineffability in this case is not related to agnosticism but the dependently coarising nature of an entity that defies linguistic reification. Since the nature of an entity is empty, the mind of the sentient being is empty as well. Mind-body dualism, which constitutes a core of some philosophical systems, does not hold in Chinul. The emptiness (or voidness) of the mind is the emptiness of the physical body. Voidness or emptiness is not to be understood as a lack or absence but as the nonsubstantial nature of beings. Things do not have substantial essence of their own; they exist through multilayered causation and are empty. If every other object is empty like the mind, why does Chinul say “mind is the Buddha,” when any other entity in the world would appear to function equally well and could replace mind? By emphasizing that one's mind is Buddha, Chinul warns against any objectification or reification of Buddha. At the same time, by underscoring the mind, instead of other entities, Chinul identifies the source and mode of one's delusion. Delusion arises not through a certain quality of an entity but through the subject's failure to see the nonsubstantial nature of one's ontological reality.

In *Secrets on Cultivating the Mind*, Chinul first characterizes the mind as “space,” reminiscent of “emptiness,” and then as “void, calm, numinous awareness” (Kor. *kongjŏk yŏngji*). This “mind of void, calm, numinous awareness” is always there even when one is deluded; only when one “traces back the radiance” of this mind does one attain Buddhahood. Chinul further describes the nature of this mind as “unstained,” “complete,” and “whole.” With these expressions, one might wonder whether Chinul assumes a certain essence of the mind, something comparable to the Cartesian Ego-Cogito. However, caution is necessary in interpreting the use of language in Zen Buddhist texts such as Chinul's *Secrets*. The impression that Chinul might believe the mind is marked by a certain essence is derived from a linguistic convention based on distinctions made through the naming process. In

1. Kwŏnsu chŏnghye kyŏlsa mun (Encouragement to Practice: The Compact of *Samādhi* and *Prajñā* Community), in *Han'guk Pulgyo chŏnsŏ* (Collected Works of Korean Buddhism), 13 vols. Dongguk taehakkyo ch'ulp'anbu (1979–2001) 4.698a–708a, p. 4.698a.

Chinul's description of the mind, he alternates between using affirmation and negation, creating a seemingly contradictory logic. For example, Chinul describes the mind as "pure" and later declares that there is neither purity nor impurity. He also describes the mind as "void" and then defines it as "calm and luminous awareness." By simultaneously employing expressions that are conventionally considered opposites to denote the mind, Chinul presents the nonsubstantial nature of the mind through the substantial medium of language. Purity as well as impurity, enlightenment as well as delusion, acquires new meaning through Chinul's nonconventional use of language.

One corollary of this approach to the mind is an emphasis on the provisional nature of decision-making and thus of categorizing. This includes the familiar distinctions of ethical categories such as right and wrong, purity and impurity, even delusion and enlightenment. Chinul problematizes the binary system prevalent in the ethical categories because none of these categories has its own essence to distinguish itself from its opposite; both good and evil exist through conditioned causality and thus are empty. It is through the subject's mind that these provisional categories seem to acquire permanent status. Negating the fixed identity of ethical categories, or any distinction-making, does not deny the necessity of making decisions and thus distinction in the life-world of the sentient being. The fact that decisions and determinations need to be made in one's daily life, however, does not justify reifying provisional distinctions and categories. Here is another significance of taking the mind as the object of practice: the mind is capable of both enlightenment and delusion, while both of them are empty. As Chinul clearly explains, enlightenment does not mean one should suppress delusion and remove what is considered evil and promote what is considered good. The subject-object dualism in which the subject's mind frequently plays the role of constructing the meaning of the outside world is replaced, in Chinul's Zen Buddhism, with the view of the subject whose identity is possible through the subject's realization of nonsubstantiality of subjectivity. To realize one's identity in this case is to realize its nonidentity.

If realizing one's own mind is the only way to attain Buddhahood, how does this realization avoid subjectivism and solipsism? In other words, how does the subject come into a relationship with the object in Chinul's philosophy if awareness of the mind is realized through introspection? And if the mind itself is the Buddha, and one does not need external expedients to realize this inner nature, how does one ever know the mind? What is the way to get from "me" to "my mind"? In order to deal with the first issue of the relationship between the subject and the object, Chinul incorporates Huayan Buddhist thought in his *Treatise on Complete and Sudden Attainment of Buddhahood* and contends that the mind of the sentient being is the same as the dependently coarising phenomena in the external world. Subjectivism is a result of the subject-object dualism. Once the dualism is resolved through the realization of the emptiness of subjectivity, the inside is the outside. For the second issue, regarding the practical dimension of the practitioner's realizing his or her own nature, Chinul introduces, in his

*Treatise on Resolving Doubts about Huatou Meditation*, *huatou* meditation to facilitate the transformation of the subject's dualism to a nondualist mode of thinking and thereby realize their true nature.

## Translation

The triple world is blazing in defilement as if it were a house on fire.<sup>2,3</sup> How can you bear to tarry here and complacently undergo such long suffering? If you wish to avoid wandering in samsara there is no better way than to seek Buddhahood. If you want to become a Buddha, understand that Buddha is the mind. How can you search for the mind in the far distance? It is not outside the body. The physical body is a phantom, for it is subject to birth and death; the true mind is like space, for it neither ends nor changes. Therefore it is said, "These hundred bones will crumble and return to fire and wind. But One Thing is eternally numinous and covers heaven and earth."<sup>4</sup>

It is tragic. People have been deluded for so long. They do not recognize that their own minds are the true Buddhas. They do not recognize that their own natures are the true dharma. They want to search for the dharma, yet they still look far away for holy ones. They want to search for the Buddha, yet they will not observe their own minds. If they aspire to the path of Buddhahood while obstinately holding to their feeling that the Buddha is outside the mind or the dharma is outside the nature, then, even though they pass through kalpas as numerous as dust motes, burning their bodies, charring their arms, crushing their bones and exposing their marrow, or else write *sūtras* with their own blood, never lying down to sleep, eating only one offering a day at the hour of the Hare [5 to 7 A.M.], or even studying through the entire *tripiṭaka* and cultivating all sorts of ascetic practices, it is like trying to make rice by boiling sand—it will only add to their tribulation.<sup>5</sup>

2. The following translation, from *Han'guk Pulgyo chōnsō*, 4.708b–714a, was translated by Robert E. Buswell, Jr. and originally appeared in Buswell 1991, pp. 98–117. We gratefully acknowledge permission to republish this work.

Subsequent endnotes are those originally included in Buswell's translation. I have kept only those notes that are relevant to this excerpt. The Wade-Giles Romanization of Chinese characters in Buswell's translation has been converted to the Pinyin system. T. refers to Takakusu Junjirō, et al., eds. *Taishō shinshū daizōkyō*. 100 vols. (Tokyo: Taishō Issaikyō Kankōkai), 1924–1932, a standard collection of the East Asian Buddhist canon compiled in Japan.

3. Chinul is alluding here to the famous Parable of the Burning House from the *Lotus Sūtra*. See *Miaofa lianhua jing* 2, T. 9.262.12c–13c; Leon Hurvitz, trans., *Scripture of the Lotus Blossom of the Fine Dharma* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1976), pp. 58–62.

4. *Jingde chuandeng lu* 30, T. 51.2076.463b–c.

5. Adapted from Wŏnhyo's *Palsim suhaeng chang*: "The practice of persons who have wisdom is to steam rice grains to prepare rice; the practice of persons without wisdom is to steam sand to prepare rice." In Cho Myŏng-gi, ed., *Wŏnhyo taesa chŏnjip* (Seoul, 1978), p. 605.

If they would only understand their own minds, then, without searching, approaches to dharma as numerous as the sands of the Ganges and uncountable sublime meanings would all be understood. As the World Honored One said, "I see that all sentient beings everywhere are endowed with a *tathāgata*'s wisdom and virtue."<sup>6</sup> He also said "All the illusory guises in which sentient beings appear take shape in the sublime mind of the *tathāgata*'s complete enlightenment."<sup>7</sup> Consequently, you should know that outside this mind there is no Buddhahood which can be attained. All the Buddhas of the past were merely persons who understood their minds. All the sages and saints of the present are likewise merely persons who have cultivated their minds. All future meditators should rely on this dharma as well.

I hope that you who cultivate the path will never search outside. The nature of the mind is unstained; it is originally whole and complete in itself. If you will only leave behind false conditioning, you will be "such" like the Buddha.

Question: If you say that the Buddha-nature exists in the body right now, then, since it is in the body, it is not separate from us ordinary men. So why can we not see this Buddha-nature now? Please explain this further to enlighten us on this point.

Chinul: It is in your body, but you do not see it. Ultimately, what is that which during the twelve periods of the day knows hunger and thirst, cold and heat, anger and joy? This physical body is a synthesis of four conditions: earth, water, fire, and wind. Since matter is passive and insentient, how can it see, hear, sense, and know? That which is able to see, hear, sense, and know is perforce your Buddha-nature. For this reason, Linji said, "The four great elements do not know how to expound dharma or listen to dharma. Empty space does not know how to expound dharma or listen to dharma. It is only that formless thing before your eyes, clear and bright of itself, which knows how to expound dharma or listen to dharma."<sup>8</sup> This "formless thing" is the dharma-seal of all the Buddhas; it is your original mind. Since this Buddha-nature exists in your body right now, why do you vainly search for it outside?...

Question: Through what expedient is it possible to trace back the radiance of one's sense-faculties in one thought and awaken to the self-nature?

Chinul: The self-nature is just your own mind. What other expedients do you need? If you ask for expedients to seek understanding, you are like a person who, because he does not see his own eyes, assumes that he has no eyes and decides to find some way to see. But since he does have eyes, how else is he supposed to see? If he realizes that in fact he has never lost his eyes, this is the same as seeing his eyes, and no longer would he waste his time trying to find a way to see. How then could he have any thoughts that he could not

6. *Avatamsaka Sūtra*, "Appearance of the Tathāgatas" (Rulai chuxian pin), *Dafang-guang fo huayan jing* 51, T. 10.279.272c.

7. In the *Complete Enlightenment Sūtra* (*Yuanjue jing*), T. 17.842.914a.

8. *Linji lu*, T. 47.1985.497b.

see? Your own numinous awareness is exactly the same. Since this awareness is your own mind, how else are you going to understand? If you seek some other way to understand, you will never understand. Simply by knowing that there is no other way to understand, you are seeing the nature.

Question: When the superior man hears dharma, he understands easily. Average and inferior men, however, are not without doubt and confusion. Could you describe some expedients so that the deluded too can enter into enlightenment?

Chinul: The path is not related to knowing or not knowing.<sup>9</sup> You should get rid of the mind which clings to its delusion and looks forward to enlightenment, and listen to me.

Since all dharmas are like dreams or phantoms, deluded thoughts are originally calm and the sense-spheres are originally void. At the point where all dharmas are void, the numinous awareness is not obscured. That is to say, this mind of void and calm, numinous awareness is your original face. It is also the dharma-seal transmitted without a break by all the Buddhas of the three time periods, the successive generations of patriarchs, and the wise advisors of this world. If you awaken to this mind, then this is truly what is called not following the rungs of a ladder: you climb straight to the stage of Buddhahood, and each step transcends the triple world. Returning home, your doubts will be instantly resolved and you will become the teacher of men and gods. Endowed with compassion and wisdom and complete in the twofold benefit, you will be worthy of receiving the offerings of men and gods. Day after day you can use ten thousand taels of gold without incurring debt. If you can do this, you will be a truly great man who has indeed finished the tasks of this life.

Question: In our case, what is this mind of void and calm, numinous awareness?

Chinul: What has just asked me this question is precisely your mind of void and calm, numinous awareness. Why not trace back its radiance rather than search for it outside? For your benefit I will now point straight to your original mind so that you can awaken to it. Clear your minds and listen to my words.

From morning to evening, throughout the twelve periods of the day, during all your actions and activities—whether seeing, hearing, laughing, talking, whether angry or happy, whether doing good or evil—ultimately who is it that is able to perform all these actions? Speak! If you say that it is the physical body which is acting, then at the moment when a man's life comes to an end, even though the body has not yet decayed, how is it that the eyes cannot see, the ears cannot hear, the nose cannot smell, the tongue cannot talk, the body cannot move, the hands cannot grasp, and the feet cannot run?

9. Adapted from Nanquan Puyuan (748–835) in *Jingde chuandeng lu* 10, T. 51.2076.276c.

You should know that what is capable of seeing, hearing, moving, and acting has to be your original mind; it is not your physical body. Furthermore the four elements which make up the physical body are by nature void; they are like images in a mirror or the moon's reflection in water. How can they be clear and constantly aware, always bright and never obscured—and, upon activation, be able to put into operation sublime functions as numerous as the sands of the Ganges? For this reason it is said, "Drawing water and carrying firewood are spiritual powers and sublime functions."<sup>10</sup>

There are many points at which to enter the noumenon.<sup>11</sup> I will indicate one approach which will allow you to return to the source.

Chinul: Do you hear the sounds of that crow cawing and that magpie calling?

Student: Yes.

Chinul: Trace them back and listen to your hearing-nature. Do you hear any sounds?

Student: At that place, sounds and discriminations do not obtain.

Chinul: Marvelous! Marvelous! This is Avalokiteśvara's method for entering the noumenon.<sup>12</sup> Let me ask you again. You said that sounds and discriminations do not obtain at that place. But since they do not obtain, isn't the hearing-nature just empty space at such a time?

Student: Originally it is not empty. It is always bright and never obscured.

Chinul: What is this essence which is not empty?

Student: As it has no former shape, words cannot describe it.

This is the life force of all the Buddhas and patriarchs—have no further doubts about that. Since it has no former shape, how can it be large or small? Since it cannot be large or small, how can it have limitations? Since it has no limitations, it cannot have inside or outside. Since there is no inside or outside, there is no far or near. As there is no far or near, there is no here or there. As there is no here or there, there is no coming or going. As there is no coming or going, there is no birth or death. As there is no birth or death, there is no past or present. As there is no past or present, there is no delusion or awakening. As there is no delusion or awakening, there is no ordinary

10. *Jingde chuandeng lu* 8, T. 51.2076.263b.

11. One of the two major approaches to practice attributed to Bodhidharma.

12. Avalokiteśvara's method for tracing hearing to its source in the mind was praised by Śākyamuni Buddha as the ideal practice for people in a degenerate age; see *Sūtraṅgama Sūtra* (*Lengyang jing*) 6, T. 19.945.128b–129c.

man or saint. As there is no ordinary man or saint, there is no purity or impurity. Since there is no impurity or purity, there is no right or wrong. Since there is no right or wrong, names and words do not apply to it. Since none of these concepts apply, all sense-bases and sense-objects, all deluded thoughts, even forms and shapes and names and words are all inapplicable. Hence how can it be anything but originally void and calm and originally no-thing?

Nevertheless, at that point where all dharmas are empty, the numinous awareness is not obscured. It is not the same as insentience, for its nature is spiritually deft. This is your pure mind-essence of void and calm, numinous awareness. This pure, void, and calm mind is that mind of outstanding purity and brilliance of all the Buddhas of the three time periods; it is that enlightened nature which is the original source of all sentient beings. One who awakens to it and safeguards that awakening will then abide in the unitary, “such” and unmoving liberation. One who is deluded and turns his back on it passes between the six destinies, wandering in samsara for vast numbers of kalpas. As it is said, “One who is confused about the one mind and passes between the six destinies, goes and takes action. But one who awakens to the *dharmadhātu* and returns to the one mind, arrives and is still.”<sup>13</sup> Although there is this distinction between delusion and awakening, in their basic source they are one. As it is said, “The word ‘dharma’ means the mind of the sentient being.”<sup>14</sup> But as there is neither more of this void and calm mind in the saint nor less of it in the ordinary man, it is also said, “In the wisdom of the saint it is no brighter; hidden in the mind of the ordinary man it is no darker.” Since there is neither more of it in the saint nor less of it in the ordinary man how are the Buddhas and patriarchs any different from other men? The only thing that makes them different is that they can protect their minds and thoughts—nothing more.

If you believe me to the point where you can suddenly extinguish your doubt, show the will of a great man and give rise to authentic vision and understanding, if you know its taste for yourself, arrive at the stage of self-affirmation and gain understanding of your true nature, then this is the understanding-awakening achieved by those who have cultivated the mind. Since no further steps are involved, it is called sudden. Therefore it is said, “When in the cause of faith one meshes without the slightest degree of error<sup>15</sup> or with all the qualities of the fruition of Buddhahood, faith is achieved.”...

Some people do not realize that the nature of good and evil is void; they sit rigidly without moving and, like a rock crushing grass, repress both body and mind. To regard this as cultivation of the mind is a great delusion. For

13. By Chengguan (738–840), the forth Huayan patriarch, in his *Dafangguang fo huayan jing suishou yanyichao* 1, T. 36.1736.1b.

14. In the *Awakening of Faith* (*Dasheng qixin lun*), T. 32.1665.575c.

15. By Li Tongxuan, in his *Exposition of the Avataṃsaka Sūtra* (*Xin huayan jing lun*) 14, T. 36.1739.809b.



this reason it is said, “Śrāvakas cut off delusion thought after thought, but the thought which does this cutting is a brigand.”<sup>16</sup> If they could see that killing, stealing, sexual misconduct, and lying all arise from the nature, then their arising would be the same as their nonarising. At their source they are calm; why must they be cut off? As it is said, “Do not fear the arising of thoughts: only be concerned lest your awareness of them be tardy.”<sup>17</sup> It is also said, “If we are aware of a thought at the moment it arises, then through that awareness it will vanish.”<sup>18</sup>

In the case of a person who has had an awakening, although he still has adventitious defilements, these have all been purified into cream. If he merely reflects on the fact that confusion is without basis, then all the flowers in the sky of this triple world are like smoke swirling in the wind and the six phantom sense-objects are like ice melting in hot water. If thought-moment after thought-moment he continues to train in this manner, does not neglect to maintain his training, and keeps *samādhi* and *prajñā* equally balanced, then lust and hatred will naturally fade away and compassion and wisdom will naturally increase in brightness; unwholesome actions will naturally cease and meritorious practices will naturally multiply. When defilements are exhausted, birth and death cease. When the subtle streams of defilement are forever cut off, the great wisdom of complete enlightenment exists brilliantly of itself. Then he will be able to manifest billions of transformation-bodies in all the worlds of the ten directions following his inspiration and responding to the faculties of sentient beings. Like the moon in the empyrean which reflects in ten thousand pools of water, there is no limit to the responsiveness. He will be able to ferry across all sentient beings with whom he has affinities. He will be happy and free of worry. Such a person is called a Great Enlightened World Honored One.

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16. By Baozhi, in his *Gāthā in Praise of Mahāyāna (Dasheng zan)*, *Jingde chuangdeng lu* 29, T. 51.2076.450a.

17. Yongming Yanshou, in his *Mirror of the Source Record (Zongjing lu)* 38, T. 48.2016.638a.

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