

# the platform sutra

THE ZEN TEACHING OF HUI-NENG

六祖壇經



TRANSLATION AND COMMENTARY

by RED PINE

# THE PLATFORM SUTRA

THE ZEN TEACHING  
OF HUI-NENG



*Translation and Commentary by*

Red Pine

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# The Platform Sutra



*The Mahaprajnaparamita Sutra  
of the Direct Teaching of the Southern School  
of the Supreme Mahayana, The Platform Sutra*

Delivered at Tafa Temple in Shaozhou by the Sixth Patriarch, Master Hui-neng, in one volume, compiled and recorded by Fa-hai, recipient of the Formless Precepts and advocate of the Dharma.

1. Master Hui-neng took his seat in the lecture hall of Tafa Temple to expound the teaching of Mahaprajnaparamita and to transmit the Formless Precepts. Seated below him on that occasion were more than ten thousand monks, nuns, and laypeople, along with Magistrate Wei Ch'u of Shaozhou and more than thirty officials and thirty scholars. Together they asked the Master to explain the teaching of Mahaprajnaparamita.

The magistrate then instructed the Master's disciple Fa-hai to make a record to pass down to future generations so that students of the Way who carry on its guiding principle and who transmit it to others might have this testament as their authority.

2. When he spoke this *Platform Sutra*, Master Hui-neng said, “Good friends, purify your minds by reciting the teaching of Mahaprajnaparamita.” Then the Master stopped speaking, while he purified his own mind.

After a long time, he spoke again, “Good friends, please listen. My kind-hearted father was originally from Fanyang. But he was dismissed from office and banished to Lingnan and lived in Hsinchou as a commoner. My father died when I was quite young. And my widwed and destitute mother moved to Nanhai, where I experienced hardship and poverty and sold firewood in the marketplace.

Then one day a shopkeeper ordered a load of firewood brought to his store. After he took the delivery and paid me, I walked toward the door and met a customer reciting the *Diamond Sutra* out loud. As soon as I heard the words, my mind felt clear and awake, and I asked the man, ‘Where did you get this scripture you’re reciting?’

He said, ‘On Huangmei County’s East Fengmao Mountain in Chichou Prefecture, when I was paying my respects to the Fifth Patriarch, Master Hung-jen. His congregation included more than a thousand disciples. And while I was there, I heard him tell the monks and laypeople that just by memorizing the *Diamond Sutra* they would see their natures and immediately become buddhas.’

As soon as I heard this, I felt drawn by something from a past life. I said goodbye to my mother and left for Huangmei’s Fengmao Mountain to pay my respects to the Fifth Patriarch, Master Hung-jen.

3. Master Hung-jen asked me, ‘Where are you from? And what exactly do you hope to get from me by coming to this mountain

to pay your respects?’

I answered, ‘Your disciple is from Lingnan, a commoner of Hsinchou. The reason I came all this way to pay my respects is I want to be a buddha. I don’t want anything else.’

The Master scoffed, ‘But you’re from Lingnan and a jungle rat as well. How can you possibly be a buddha?’

I replied, ‘People come from the north or south, not their buddha nature. The lives of this jungle rat and the Master’s aren’t the same, but how can our buddha nature differ?’

The Master was about to say something more to me. But when he saw his attendants standing there, he didn’t say anything else and sent me to join the sangha workforce. A novice then led me to the milling room, where I pedaled a millstone for more than eight months.

4. One day, the Fifth Patriarch suddenly called all of his disciples together. After they had assembled, he said, ‘I’ve told you that the greatest concern for a human being is life and death. But you disciples spend your days making offerings, just looking for ways to reap merit and not for a way out of the bitter Sea of Sansara. If you’re blind to your own nature, how can you find the doorway to merit? Go back to your rooms and look into yourselves. Those of you who are wise, make use of the prajna wisdom of your own nature. Each of you write me a gatha. When I read your gathas, if any of you understands what is truly important, I will give you my robe and my Dharma and appoint you the Sixth Patriarch. Hurry, as if there were a fire!’

5. Having received these instructions, his disciples headed back to their rooms and said to one another, ‘There’s no need for us to clear our minds and trouble ourselves about writing a gatha to

show the abbot. The venerable Shen-hsiu is our precept instructor. After he receives the Dharma, we can look to him. Why should we write a gatha?' So they all stopped worrying about it, and no one dared to submit a poem.

At that time, in front of the Patriarch's Hall, there was a three-section-long corridor. Because people left offerings at the foot of the wall, the abbot wanted to cover it with scenes from the *Lankavatara Sutra* and paintings of the five patriarchs transmitting the robe and the Dharma as a record to be passed down to future generations. The painter Lu Chen had inspected the wall and was going to begin work the following day.

6. The venerable Shen-hsiu thought, 'No one is going to submit a mind-poem, because I'm their precept instructor. But if I don't submit one, how can the Patriarch tell if the understanding of my mind is deep or not? It would be right for me to show the Patriarch a poem that reveals my understanding, as long as what I wanted was the Dharma. But it would be wrong, as long as what I wanted was the patriarchship. I would be no better than a fool who thinks he can usurp the position of a sage. But if I don't submit a mind-poem, I'll never receive the Dharma.' As he considered this, he kept thinking, 'What a predicament!'

Finally at midnight, without letting anyone know, he went to write his poem on the middle of the south corridor wall in hopes of obtaining the robe and the Dharma. 'When the Patriarch sees my gatha and reads these words,' he thought, 'if he comes to find me, the moment I see him, I will tell him I wrote it. But when he sees my gatha, if he says it's not good enough, it will be because I'm deluded and the obstruction of my past karma is too great, and I'm not ready to receive the Dharma. The Master's mind is impossible to fathom. I may as well stop worrying about it.' So the venerable Shen-hsiu held up a lantern



and wrote his gatha on the middle of the south corridor wall at midnight, and no one saw him. His gatha went:

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

7. After Shen-hsiu wrote this gatha, he returned to his room unseen and lay down. At dawn, the Fifth Patriarch sent for the court artist, Lu Chen, to come to the south corridor to paint scenes from the *Lankavatara*. The Fifth Patriarch suddenly saw this gatha. After he read it, he told Lu, ‘You’ve gone to so much trouble and come so far, we will pay you thirty thousand cash, but we won’t need any images now. The *Diamond Sutra* says, “All images are illusions.” It would be better if we kept this gatha for deluded people to recite. If they rely on it for their practice, they won’t fall into 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 gatha. When everyone saw this, they were filled with admiration. ‘Unless you all recite and understand this gatha,’ he said, ‘you won’t see your nature. Anyone who relies on this for their practice won’t regress.’ As his disciples recited it, they all did so with respect and exclaimed how wonderful it was.

Later, the Fifth Patriarch called Shen-hsiu to his room and asked, ‘Did you write the gatha? If you did, you’re ready to receive my Dharma.’

Shen-hsiu 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 consideration as to whether your disciple has acquired

enough wisdom to understand what is truly important or not.'

The Fifth Patriarch said, 'This gatha of yours shows your understanding has only reached the threshold and has not yet entered inside. If ordinary people use your gatha in their practice, they won't regress. But someone with such an understanding who seeks perfect enlightenment will never realize it. 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 gatha. If you're able to enter the door and see your nature, I will give you the robe and the Dharma.' Shen-hsiu left, but after several days he still hadn't written anything.

8. A novice walked past the milling room chanting this gatha. As soon as I heard it, I knew it was by someone who hadn't seen his nature or understood what was truly important. I asked the boy, 'What gatha 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 his Dharma. So he told his disciples to write a gatha and show it to him, and he'll give his robe and Dharma to whoever understands what is truly important, and that person will become the Sixth Patriarch. One of the senior monks, Shen-hsiu, wrote this "Formless Gatha" along the south corridor. And the Patriarch told all of his disciples to recite it and whoever understands this gatha will see their nature and whoever uses it for their practice will achieve liberation.'

I replied, '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 that I can see this gatha and pay my respects? Hopefully, by reciting it, I'll establish a karmic connection and be reborn in a buddhaland.'

The novice then led me to the south corridor, where I bowed before the gatha. Because I was illiterate, I asked someone to read it. Once I heard it, I understood what was truly important, and I also composed a gatha. I asked someone who could write to write it on the west corridor wall so that I could reveal my mind. Unless you know your own mind, studying the Dharma is useless. But once you know your mind and see your nature, you understand what is truly important. My gatha went:

‘Bodhi doesn’t have any trees  
this mirror doesn’t have a stand  
our buddha nature is forever pure  
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 clean  
dust has no place to land.’

When the disciples in the courtyard saw these gathas of mine, they were all dumbfounded. After I left and went back to the milling room, the Fifth Patriarch suddenly came down the corridor and also saw them. He knew I understood what was truly important, but he didn’t want others to know. So he told everyone, ‘This one doesn’t get it either.’

9. 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, as he transmitted

the robe and the direct teaching to me, and I became the Sixth Patriarch. The robe is an embodiment of trust that has been handed down from one generation to the next. But the Dharma is transmitted from mind to mind and must be realized by people themselves.

Then the Fifth Patriarch said, 'Hui-neng, since ancient times 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 must leave at once.'

10. After receiving the robe and the Dharma, I left during the third watch, and the Fifth Patriarch accompanied me personally to the Nine Rivers Ferry. As I boarded, we said good-bye, and the Patriarch instructed me, 'Go now. And do your best to take the Dharma south. But don't spread this teaching for three years. Wait until the hard times are over before you go around teaching. And be skillful when you guide those who are deluded. Once they are able to open their minds, they are no different than those who are enlightened.' Our farewells done, I headed south.

11. Less than two months later, I reached Tayu Ridge. Unknown to me, several hundred people had been chasing me, hoping to catch me and take away the Patriarch's robe. But they had all given up halfway, all except one monk, whose surname was Ch'en and whose Buddhist name was Hui-shun. He had previously been a general of the third grade, and he was a rough character. He caught up with me at the ridge, and 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 Hui-shun there at the ridge. He was

ready to hear, and as soon as I spoke, his mind opened up. Then I told him to go back north and teach others.

12. I have come here today because I have a connection of many lifetimes with you officials, clerics, and laypeople. This teaching has been passed down by the ancients. It isn't something I discovered by myself. But if you wish to hear this teaching of the ancients, you must listen with pure minds. And if you wish to get rid of your delusions, you should understand it as past generations have."

Hui-neng then yelled out, "Good friends! You already possess the prajna wisdom of enlightenment! But because your minds are deluded, you can't understand by yourselves. You need to find a truly good friend to show you the way to see your nature. Good friends, buddha nature isn't different for the ignorant and the wise. It's just that people are deluded or awake. When people are deluded, they're ignorant. When they wake up, they become wise.

13. Good friends, this Dharma teaching of mine is based on meditation and wisdom. But don't make the mistake of thinking that meditation and wisdom are separate. Meditation and wisdom are of one essence and not two. Meditation is the body of wisdom, and wisdom is the function of meditation. Wherever you find wisdom, you find meditation. And wherever you find meditation, you find wisdom. Good friends, what this means is that meditation and wisdom are the same.

Fellow students of the Way, be careful. Don't think that meditation comes first and then gives rise to wisdom or that wisdom comes first and then gives rise to meditation or that meditation and wisdom are separate. For those who hold such

views, the Dharma is dualistic: If the mouth speaks of goodness, but the mind doesn't think of goodness, meditation and wisdom aren't the same. But if goodness pervades both the mouth and the mind, if what is external and internal are alike, then meditation and wisdom are the same.

The cultivation of self-awareness does not involve argument. People who argue about which comes first and which comes second only confuse themselves. Unless you put an end to right and wrong, you will give rise to self-existent dharmas, and you will never be free of the Four States.

14. One Practice Samadhi means at all times, whether walking, standing, sitting, or lying down, always practicing with a straightforward mind. The *Vimalakirti Sutra* says, 'A straightforward mind is the place of enlightenment,' and 'a straightforward mind is the pure land.' Don't practice hypocrisy with your mind, while you talk about being straightforward with your mouth. If you speak about One Practice Samadhi with your mouth, but you don't practice with a straightforward mind, you're no disciple of the Buddha. Simply practice with a straightforward mind and don't become attached to any dharma. This is what is meant by One Practice Samadhi.

Deluded people who cling to the external attributes of a dharma get hold of One Practice Samadhi and just say that sitting motionless, eliminating delusions, and not thinking thoughts are One Practice Samadhi. But if that were true, a dharma like that would be the same as lifelessness and would constitute an obstruction of the Way instead. The Way has to flow freely. Why block it up? The Way flows freely when the mind doesn't dwell on any dharma. Once it dwells on something, it becomes bound. If sitting motionless were right, *Vimalakirti* wouldn't have

criticized Shariputra for meditating in the forest.

Good friends, I know there are people who tell others to devote themselves to sitting and contemplating their minds or purity and not to move or to think. Deluded people are unaware, so they turn things upside down with their attachments. There are hundreds of such people who teach the Way like this. But they are, you should know, greatly mistaken.

15. Good friends, what are meditation and wisdom like? They're like a lamp and its light. When there's a lamp, there's light. When there's no lamp, there's no light. The lamp is the light's body, and light is the lamp's function. They have two names but not two bodies. This teaching concerning meditation and wisdom is also like this.

16. Good friends, the Dharma isn't direct or indirect. It's people who are sharp or dull. For those who are deluded, there is indirect persuasion. For those who are aware, there is direct cultivation: Know your mind and see your nature. For those who are aware, there is basically no separation. For those who aren't aware, there are infinite kalpas on the Wheel of Rebirth.

17. Good friends, since ancient times, this Dharma teaching of ours, both its direct and indirect versions, has proclaimed 'no thought' as its doctrine, 'no form' as its body, and 'no attachment' as its foundation.

What do we mean by a form that is 'no form'? To be free of form in the presence of forms. And 'no thought'? Not to think about thoughts. And 'no attachment,' which is everyone's basic nature? Thought after thought, not to become attached. 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, the dharma body becomes separated from the material body. When you go from one thought to another, don't become attached to any dharma. Once one thought becomes attached, every thought becomes attached, which is what we call 'bondage.' But when you go from one thought to another without becoming attached to any dharma, there's no bondage. 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 nature is perfectly pure. This is why we take 'no form as our body.'

To be unaffected by any object is what is meant by 'no thought,' to be free of objects in our thoughts and not to give rise to thoughts about dharmas. But don't think about nothing at all. Once your thoughts stop, you die and are reborn somewhere else. Students of the Way, take heed. Don't misunderstand the meaning of this teaching. It's one thing to be mistaken yourself, but quite another to lead others astray then to criticize the teaching of the sutras while remaining unaware that you yourself are lost. Thus, the reason we proclaim 'no thought' as our doctrine is because deluded people think in terms of objects, and on the basis of these thoughts they give rise to erroneous views. This is the origin of all afflictions and delusions.

Nevertheless, when this school proclaims 'no thought' as its doctrine, those people who transcend objects and who don't give rise to thoughts, even though they have no thoughts, they do not then proclaim 'no thought.' What does 'no' negate? And what thought is 'thought' about? 'No' negates dualities and afflictions. And 'thought' is thought about the original nature of reality. Reality is the body of thought, and thought is the function of reality. When your nature gives rise to thought, even though



you sense something, remain free and unaffected by the world of objects. The *Vimalakirti Sutra* says, ‘Externally, be skilled at distinguishing the attributes of dharmas, and internally, remain unshaken by the ultimate truth.’

18. 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 dispassionate.

If someone says to contemplate the mind, the mind is basically a delusion. And because 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’s because of deluded thoughts that reality is obscured. But once you are free of deluded thoughts, your original nature is pure. If you don’t see that your nature is already pure, and you rouse your mind to contemplate purity, you create the delusion of purity instead. A delusion has no actual location, which is how we know what we contemplate is a delusion. And purity has no form. If someone establishes a form for purity and thinks they have achieved something, those who hold such a view separate themselves from their own nature and become trapped by purity instead.

And if someone cultivates dispassion, as long as they don’t pay attention to the faults of others, their nature is dispassionate. But deluded people act dispassionate then open their mouths and talk about right and wrong and turn their backs on the Way. Meanwhile, contemplating the mind and contemplating purity are actually what separates them from the Way.

19. In that case, what do we mean in this school by ‘to practice Zen’? In this school, by ‘to practice,’ we mean not to be

obstructed by anything and externally not to give rise to thoughts about objective states. And by 'Zen,' we mean to see our nature without being confused.

And what do we mean by 'Zen meditation'? Externally to be free of form is 'Zen.' And internally not to be confused is 'meditation.' Externally, if you are attached to form, internally, your mind will be confused. But if you are free of form externally, internally your nature will not be confused.

Your nature itself is pure and focused. It is just that you come into contact with objects, and as you come into contact, you become confused. When you are free of form and not confused, you are focused. To be free of form 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, we return to our original mind.' And the *Bodhisattva Precept Sutra* says, 'Our original nature is pure.' Good friends, see the fundamental purity of your own nature. Cultivate and put to work for yourselves the dharma body of your own nature. Practice for yourselves the practices of a buddha. Begin and complete for yourselves the path to buddhahood.

20. Good friends, while I confer on you the Formless Precepts, you must all experience this 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 transformation-body buddha in my own material body.

I take refuge in the future and perfect realization-body

buddha in my own material body.’

Now recite this three times.

This material body is an inn and not a fit refuge. But the three bodies I just mentioned are your ever-present 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, and I will tell you good friends how to see within your material body the three-bodied buddha present in your dharma nature, the three-bodied buddha that arises from this nature of yours.

What do we mean by the pure dharma-body buddha? Good friends, everyone’s nature is fundamentally pure, and the ten thousand dharmas are present in this nature. If we think about doing something bad, we commit bad deeds. And if we think about doing something good, we perform good deeds. Thus, we know all dharmas are present in our nature. But our nature itself remains pure. The sun and moon are always shining. It is only due to cloud cover that there is light above but darkness below and we can’t see the sun or moon or stars. Then suddenly the wind of wisdom comes along and blows the clouds and drives the fog away, and a panorama of ten thousand images appears all at once.

Our nature is pure like the clear sky above, and our wisdom is like the sun and the moon, our wisdom is always shining. But if externally we become attached to objects, the clouds of delusion cover up our nature, and we can’t see it. Then, because we meet a good friend who explains the true teaching, our delusions are blown away and everything inside and outside becomes perfectly clear, and the ten thousand dharmas in this

nature of ours all appear. This nature of ours in which the ten thousand dharmas are present is what we mean by the pure dharma body. Those of you who take refuge in yourselves, if you get rid of bad thoughts and bad practices, this is called taking refuge.

What do we mean by the myriadfold transformation body? If we didn't think, our nature would be utterly empty. When we think, we transform ourselves. If we think evil thoughts, we turn into the denizens of hell. If we think good thoughts, we turn into the deities of heaven. Malice turns us into beasts. Compassion turns us into bodhisattvas. Wisdom transports us to the higher realms, and ignorance sends us into the lower depths. Our nature is constantly transforming itself. But deluded people are unaware of this.

Once we think of goodness, wisdom arises. One lamp can dispel a thousand years of darkness, and one thought of wisdom can end ten thousand years of ignorance. Don't think about what's past. Keep thinking about what's next. When your next thought is always good, this 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. In the face of impermanence, if your next thought is good, this is what we call the realization body.

The thoughts that come from the dharma body are your transformation body. And when every thought is good, this is your realization body. When you yourself become aware of this, and when you yourself cultivate this, this is called taking refuge. Your material body is made of flesh and bones. Your material body is but an inn and not a fit place of refuge. Just become aware of your three bodies, and you will understand what is

truly important.

21. Good friends, having taken refuge in the three-bodied buddha, let us now make Four Boundless Vows. Good friends, recite after me:

‘I vow to save 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 attain buddhahood, no matter how transcendent.’

Now recite this three times.

Good friends, as for ‘I vow to save all beings, no matter how numberless,’ it isn’t Hui-neng who does the saving. Good friends, every being you can think of saves themselves with their own nature in their own bodies.

What does it mean ‘they save themselves with their own nature’? The wrong views and afflictions, the ignorance and delusions in their own material bodies already possess the nature of original enlightenment. It is just this nature of original enlightenment that saves them with right views. Once they realize the prajna wisdom of right views, they dispel their ignorance and delusion, and each being saves themselves. The false are saved with truth. The deluded are saved with awareness. The ignorant are saved with wisdom. The bad are saved with goodness. And the afflicted are saved with enlightenment. Those who are saved like this are truly saved.

As for ‘I vow to end all afflictions, no matter how countless,’ this means to get rid of the delusions of your own mind. And ‘I vow to master all teachings, no matter how limitless’ means to study the true, unexcelled Dharma. And ‘I vow to attain buddhahood, no matter how transcendent’ means always to

practice with humility, to respect all beings, to avoid attachments, to give rise to prajna from your own awareness, and to put an end to delusions. It is through self-realization that buddhahood is attained. This is the power of making vows.

22. Good friends, having made the Four Boundless Vows, let me now recite for you the Formless Repentances that destroy your 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 my bad practices of the past all be gone  
and 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 my deceitful thoughts of the past be gone  
and may they never occur again,  
such is the repentance of my nature.

May past, present, and future thoughts  
may thought after thought not be corrupted by envy  
may my envious thoughts of the past be gone  
and 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 misdeeds and not to commit them again for the rest of your life. Unless bad practices are forever

removed from your mind, reciting this before buddhas won't help you. In this Dharma teaching of mine, repentance means to stop once and for all.

23. Good friends, now that we have finished with repentance, I will transmit to you the Formless Precepts of the Triple Refuge.”

The Master said, “Good friends,

‘We take refuge in enlightenment  
and the best of two-legged creatures.  
We take refuge in truth  
and the best of what transcends desire.  
We 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. And may you experience 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 whose delusions do not arise, who have few desires and who know contentment, who are free from wealth and sex, they are called the ‘best of two-legged creatures.’

Take refuge in the truth of your own minds. When your thoughts are free from delusion, you are therefore free from attachment. And freedom from attachment is called 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,

because your nature remains uncorrupted, this is called the ‘best of congregations.’

Ordinary people don’t understand this. Day after day, they recite 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 false.

Good friends, each of you should examine this for yourselves. Don’t misdirect your attention. The sutras only say to take refuge in the buddha of yourselves. They don’t say to take refuge in some other buddha. If you don’t take refuge in your own nature, there’s no other place of refuge.

24. Good friends, now that you have finished taking refuge in the Three Treasures, each of you should clear your mind, and I will convey 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 mouth. If you chant it with your mouth but don’t practice it, it’s like an illusion or a mirage. But 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 so great, it’s like space. But if you practice Empty-mind Zen, you will fall into a featureless void. In this world of ours, space 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, heavens and hells. All of this exists in space. The



emptiness of our nature is also like this.

25. Our nature contains the ten thousand dharmas. That's how great it is. And the ten thousand dharmas are our nature. To see humans and non-humans, both the good and the bad, good dharmas and bad dharmas, without rejecting them and without being corrupted by them, this is to be like space. This is what we mean by 'great.' This is what *maha* means.

Deluded people chant this with their mouths, the wise practice it with their minds. There are also deluded people who call having an empty mind and not thinking 'great.' But that isn't how this works. The capacity of the mind is great, but if you don't use it, it's small. If you merely talk about emptiness with your mouth, but you don't practice this practice, you're no disciple of mine.

26. What does *prajna* mean? *Prajna* means 'wisdom.' At all times to keep your thoughts free of ignorance and always to practice wisdom, this is what we mean by the practice of *prajna*. One thought of ignorance, and *prajna* stops. One thought of wisdom, and *prajna* reappears. A person whose mind is full of ignorance says 'I'm practicing *prajna*.' But *prajna* has no form. It's 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 birth and death. When we are attached to objects, we give rise to birth and death, like when waves form on the water. This is what we mean by 'this shore.' When we are free of objects, there is no birth or death, like when a river flows on forever. So we say this 'leads to the other shore.' This is what we mean by *paramita*.

Deluded people chant this with their mouths. The wise practice it with their minds. If delusions are present when you chant, because delusions are present, it doesn't really exist. But if you practice when you chant, then it really exists.

Those who realize this teaching realize the teaching of prajna and practice the practice of prajna. Those who don't practice it are fools. But if they did 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 deluded and a fool. The next moment you're awake and a buddha.

Good friends, Maha Prajnaparamita is the noblest, the highest, the ultimate. It isn't present, it isn't past, and it isn't 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 and passions of the Five Skandhas.

As the noblest, the highest, and the ultimate, so should you praise this teaching of the Supreme Vehicle. Those who practice it are certain to become buddhas. But it is neither present, nor past, nor future. It's the same as meditation and wisdom, and it isn't affected by any dharma. The buddhas of the past, the present, and the future all come from it and thereby transform the Three Poisons into morality, meditation, and wisdom.

27. Good friends, this Dharma teaching of mine produces eighty-four thousand kinds of wisdom from one kind of prajna. And how so? Because people have eighty-four thousand passions. If they didn't have any passions, prajna would be ever-present and inseparable from their nature.

Those who realize this teaching do so through 'no-thought,' 'no-memory,' and 'no-attachment.' Don't create a bunch of

delusions. You yourself are the nature of suchness. View all dharmas with wisdom. Neither grasp nor reject them. This is the way to see your nature and become a buddha.

28. Good friends, if you wish to enter the dharma realm of the deep mind, the samadhi of prajna, you only need to practice the practice of Prajnaparamita. By merely memorizing 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 it is praised in detail 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 a lesser capacity hear this teaching, they fail to develop any faith in it. And why not? It's like when the great dragon sends down a heavy rain, and it rains on Jambudvipa until its towns and villages are all swept away like leaves in a stream. But if the same rain falls on the ocean, it isn't affected.

When those who follow the Mahayana hear about the *Diamond Sutra*, their minds expand with understanding. Thus, our original nature already possesses the wisdom of prajna. And when we use this wisdom to view things, we don't depend on words. It's like the rain, which doesn't originally come from the heavens but from the dragon king, who draws this water from the rivers and seas then uses it to nourish every being and plant, both the sentient and non-sentient. And the 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.

29. When people of small capacity hear this direct teaching, they're like the plants in the ground that have shallow roots. If

they should ever get drenched by a heavy rain, they're quickly uprooted, or they don't grow very tall. People of small capacity are also like this. But 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's because their barriers of mistaken views are so thick, and their roots of passion are so deep. It's like when heavy clouds cover the sun. Unless the wind blows them away, the sun can't shine through.

It isn't the wisdom of prajna that's great or small. It's because all these beings have deluded themselves into looking for a buddha through external practices and haven't yet realized their own nature that they remain people of small capacity. And yet, on hearing this direct teaching, if they depend not on external practices but simply on their own minds and they let their own nature give rise to right views, even all these beings with their mistaken views, their passions, and their 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 dwell on the inside or the outside. They will come and go freely and be able to get rid of attachments and penetrate everything without restriction. The mind that cultivates such a practice is basically no different from the *Prajnaparamita Sutra*.

30. 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 been created 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 shallow, and the wise are deep. So the foolish ask the wise, and the wise teach the Dharma to the foolish until the foolish understand and their minds open up. But once foolish people understand, and their minds open up, they are no different from the wisest of the wise.

Hence, as long as they don't understand, buddhas are ordinary beings. But the moment they understand, ordinary beings are buddhas. Hence, the ten thousand teachings are all present within your own mind. So why don't you use your own mind to see the nature of reality directly?

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. And the *Vimalakirti Sutra* says, 'Suddenly all at once you rediscover your own mind.'

31. Good friends, when I was with Master Hung-jen, as soon as I heard his words, I experienced a great realization, and I saw the original nature of reality directly. Therefore, I am passing on this teaching to later generations so that those who study the Way will realize enlightenment directly and so that those who contemplate the mind will realize their original nature directly. If you are unable to realize this by yourselves, you need to find a truly good friend to point out the way to see your 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, a guide who helps people see their nature. All good teachings can only come about due to truly good friends.

The buddhas of the Three Periods and the twelve divisions of the Canon are fully present in this nature of yours. If you can't

realize this by yourselves, you need to find a good friend to show you how to see your nature. But if you realize this by yourselves, you don't need to look for a good friend somewhere else. And if someone insists that you have to find a good friend somewhere else before you attain liberation, that place doesn't exist. You will attain liberation when you meet the good friend inside your own mind. But as long as your mind is full of confusion, delusion, and mistaken views, even the instruction of an external good friend won't be able to save 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 the land of the mind of your nature. And when inside and outside are perfectly clear, you will know your own mind. And once you know your own mind, you will be free. And once you have gained your freedom, this is the samadhi of prajna. And the realization of the samadhi of prajna is no-thought.

And what do we mean by 'no-thought'? The teaching of no-thought means to see all dharmas without being attached to any dharma, to reach everywhere without being attached anywhere, to keep your nature pure, so that when the Six Thieves pass through the Six Gates, they neither avoid nor are corrupted by the Six Realms of Sensation but come and go freely. This is the samadhi of prajna. Freedom and liberation constitute the practice of no-thought. But if you don't think any thoughts at all, the moment you make your thoughts stop, you're imprisoned by dharmas. We call this a 'onesided view.'

Those who understand the teaching of no-thought penetrate the ten thousand teachings. Those who understand the teaching of no-thought see the realm of buddhas. Those who understand

the direct teaching of no-thought reach the stage of enlightenment.

32. 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 the direct teaching of this school, it will be as if you were doing the work of a buddha. And those who uphold it and don't forsake it for the rest of their lives will themselves enter the ranks of sages. But it must be passed on. The robe and the teaching that have been transmitted in silence since ancient times must be shared with others who make great vows and who don't forsake enlightenment.

However, no matter where you are, if someone holds a different view and lacks resolve, don't be foolish enough to teach them. Not only will you harm those who have come before you, ultimately it won't do them any good. For if they are too foolish to understand, and they criticize this teaching, they will sever their roots of enlightenment for a hundred kalpas and a thousand lifetimes."

33. The Master said, "Good friends, listen to my 'Song of Formlessness.' Because it can put an end to the sins of those of you who are deluded, it is also called the 'Sin Ending Song.' It goes:

'Fools work for blessings not for the Way  
working for blessings they say is the Way  
from offerings and alms they earn endless merit  
then in their minds they build hateful futures.  
Working for blessings trying to end sin  
next life their sins are there with their blessings

to learn how to drive all sin from your mind  
within your own nature truly repent.

Once you understand Mahayana repentance  
you'll end wrongs and do right and be without sin  
students of the Way who can see for themselves  
join the same lineage as the enlightened.

Your teacher transmits this direct teaching  
hoping you students will share the same body  
if in the future you seek your true self  
purify your mind of what creates poison.

Walk the Way with vigor and don't be a slacker  
or suddenly you'll pass this life in vain  
if you come before the Mahayana's direct teaching  
press your hands together with a straightforward mind.”

After the Master had finished his discourse on the Dharma, Magistrate Wei and his fellow officials, the clerics and laypeople, all praised this without cease as something they had never heard before.

34. The Magistrate bowed respectfully and said, “Master, your discourse on the Dharma is beyond conception. But your disciple has a few questions he would like to ask and hopes the Master will answer them out of compassion.”

The Master said, “If you have a question, ask. There's no need to say more.”

The Magistrate asked, “Isn't the Dharma the Master teaches the basic doctrine of Bodhidharma, the First Patriarch from the Western Region?”



The Master said, “Yes, it is.”

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

The Sixth Patriarch said, “Indeed, there was no merit. Your Eminence should not doubt Bodhidharma’s response. Emperor Wu followed a mistaken path and did not recognize 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 can’t confuse blessings with merit. Merit concerns the dharma body, not a field of blessings. It’s your own dharma nature that possesses merit. To see your nature is one part of it, to be impartial and straightforward is the other. Internally see your buddha nature, and externally be respectful. If you slight others, you’re not free of the self, and you’re devoid of merit. As long as your nature is an empty fiction, your dharma body possesses no merit. But if thought after thought you cultivate an impartial and straightforward mind, your merit is far from slight. And when you show your respect, doing this with your body is one part of merit, and doing it with your mind is the other. But merit is created by the mind. Blessings and merit are different. Emperor Wu did not understand the true meaning of this. It wasn’t the Patriarch who was at fault.”

35. The Magistrate bowed respectfully and asked again, “Your

disciple sees monks and laypeople who keep chanting ‘Amita Buddha’ in hopes of being reborn in the Western Paradise. Could the Master please tell us if we can be reborn there or not, so that our doubts may be put to rest?”

The Master said, “If Your Eminence will listen, I will explain. When the Blessed One was in Shravasti, he preached about the Western Paradise in order to convert people. The sutras clearly say it isn’t far from here. It was only for the sake of those with shallow roots that he said it was distant. But he said it was near for those with greater wisdom. There are two kinds of people but not two kinds of Dharma. Delusion and awareness differ, and understanding can be fast or slow. Deluded people chant the Buddha’s name in order to be reborn there, while those who are aware purify their own minds. This is why the Buddha said, ‘As their minds are purified, their buddhalands are purified.’

Your Eminence, if people here in the East simply purify their minds, they will be free of sin. But if people in the West have impure minds and go too far, the deluded among them might wish to be reborn here in the East. The two places are both the same. As long as the land of your mind isn’t impure, the Western Paradise isn’t far off. But if your mind gives rise to impure thoughts, chanting the Buddha’s name won’t get you reborn there. You’ll travel a hundred thousand miles before you eliminate the Ten Evil Deeds, and another eight thousand before you put an end to the Eight Wrong Ways. But if you just practice with a straightforward mind, you’ll be there in a fingersnap.

Your Eminence, if you just practice the Ten Good Deeds, why would you need to be reborn somewhere else? And unless you stop thinking about the Ten Evil Deeds, what buddha will welcome you? Once you realize the direct teaching of no-birth, seeing the Western Paradise only takes an instant. And if you

don't realize the direct teaching of the Mahayana, chanting the Buddha's name to be reborn there will only take you on a long road that never arrives."

The Sixth Patriarch said, "I will take Your Eminence to the Western Paradise right now, and you will witness it for yourself. 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 all of you the Western Paradise, and you won't leave here until you are free of doubt." The assembly was startled, and no one knew what was going to happen.

The Master said, "All of you should listen carefully. Everyone's physical body is a city. Your eyes, ears, nose, tongue, and skin are the city's gates. These five gates are on the outside, and on the inside is the gate of the intellect. Your mind is the kingdom, and your nature is the king. When your nature is there, so is the king. When your nature is gone, the king is gone too. When your nature is present, your body and mind are present. When your nature is absent, your body and mind cease to exist. The Buddha is a creation of your nature. Don't look outside your body. When you're blind to your own nature, the Buddha is an ordinary being. When you're aware of your own nature, an ordinary being is the Buddha.

Compassion and Kindness are Avalokiteshvara. Joy and Detachment are Mahasthama. Power and Purity are Shakyamuni. Impartiality and Directness are Maitreya. The self is Mount Sumeru, and the deluded mind is the ocean. Afflictions are its waves, poisonous thoughts are its malevolent dragons,

and passions are its denizens of the deep. Delusions are its ghosts, the Three Poisons are its hells, ignorance is its realm of beasts, and the Ten Good Deeds are its heavens.

But when there is no self, Sumeru crumbles. When you get rid of delusions, the sea dries up. When afflictions are gone, the waves cease. When poisonous thoughts end, the denizens of the deep vanish. When the tathagata of your enlightened nature shines the light of wisdom on the land of your mind, the Six Gates shine with purity, the realms of the Six Desires become transparent, the Three Poisons disappear, the hells all vanish, inside and outside are perfectly clear and no different from the Western Paradise. Unless you practice like this, how are you going to get there?”

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

36. The Master said, “Good friends, if you wish to practice this, you can do it at home too. It doesn’t require living in a monastery. If you live in a monastery and don’t practice, you’re like those people in the Western Paradise who think bad thoughts. And if you practice at home, you’re like the people here in the East who perform good deeds. As long as you resolve 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 this into practice, you will never be apart from me.  
My song goes:

‘Versed in words and versed in thoughts  
like the sun in the sky  
transmitting their teaching directly  
appearing in the world to vanquish false doctrines  
it isn’t their teaching that’s direct or not  
but awareness that’s quick or slow  
foolish people who study this teaching  
can’t understand the Dharma directly.

There must be ten thousand ways to explain it  
but all are based on one rule  
in your dark house of afflictions  
keep the sun of wisdom shining  
falsehood arrives because of afflictions  
when truth appears afflictions depart  
letting truth and falsehood be  
nothing is left to purify.

Enlightenment is already pure  
the thought of it is a delusion  
but inside delusion is purity  
once truth removes the Three Obstructions  
if you follow the Way in this world  
let nothing block your path  
paying attention to your own mistakes  
will keep you in step with the Way.

The Way dwells in this bodily likeness

don't leave the Way to look for the Way  
you won't find the Way that way  
all you will find is trouble  
if you want to find the true Way  
to cultivate truth is the Way  
unless your mind is set on the truth  
you'll pass it by in the dark.

People who truly follow the Way  
don't consider the faults of the world  
those who consider the wrongs of the world  
only add to their own  
I don't condemn the faults of others  
my own wrongs are what I'm after  
just get rid of thoughts about wrongs  
and all your afflictions will shatter.

If you would then teach foolish people  
you'll need to use skillful means  
if you can rid them of doubts  
their enlightenment is certain  
the Dharma is in the world  
in the world beyond the world  
don't run away from the world  
to find a place beyond the world.

False views make up the world  
true views are the world beyond  
when true and false are both dismissed  
your buddha nature will be manifest  
this is simply the straightforward teaching

also known as the Mahayana  
delusion lasts countless kalpas  
awareness takes but an instant.””

37. The Master said, “Good friends, if you all recite this verse and practice in accordance with it, even if we’re a thousand miles apart, you’ll always be by my side. And if you don’t practice in accordance with it, even if we’re face-to-face, you’ll be a thousand miles away. Each of you must practice yourselves. The Dharma won’t do it for you.

It’s time now for you all to leave and for me to return to Tsaohsi Mountain. If any of you have any important questions, come to the mountain. I’ll get rid of them for you, and you’ll all see your buddha nature.”

The entire audience of officials, clerics, and laypeople all bowed to the Master, and everyone sighed, “What a great realization! How unprecedented! Who would have guessed that we would be blessed with a buddha here in Lingnan?” Then everyone left.

38. The Master lived on Tsaohsi Mountain and preached in Shaochou and Kuangchou for more than forty years. In terms of disciples, both monks and nuns as well as laypeople, he had somewhere between three and five thousand, too many to name. As for his basic principle, he transmitted the *Platform Sutra* and used this as 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 passed it on. Without the authority of the *Platform Sutra*, they aren’t disciples of the Southern School. If they haven’t yet received this authority, even if they teach the direct teaching, they still won’t understand its fundamentals and can’t avoid arguments.

However, those who have received this teaching are simply urged to practice it. Arguing about it involves thoughts of victory or defeat and is contradictory to the Way of the Buddha.

39. People all refer to “Hui-neng of the South” and “Shen-hsiu of the North,” but they don’t know the real reason for this. It was because Master Shen-hsiu served as abbot and practiced at Yuchuan Temple in Tangyang County of Nanching Prefecture, and Master Hui-neng lived on Tsaohsi Mountain, thirty-five *li* south of Shaochou. There’s only one school of Dharma, but people are from the north or the south. This is why we use the terms “Northern” and “Southern.”

And what is the origin of “direct” and “indirect”? Although there is only one kind of Dharma, understanding can be fast or slow. When understanding is slow, we say it’s “indirect.” And when understanding is fast, we say it’s “direct.” The Dharma isn’t direct or indirect, it’s people who are sharp or dull. This is why we have the terms “direct” and “indirect.”

40. Master Shen-hsiu often heard people say that Hui-neng’s teaching was fast and pointed straight to the path. So Shen-hsiu told his disciple Chih-ch’eng, “You’re intelligent and perceptive. Go to Huineng’s place on Tsaohsi Mountain for me and pay your respects, but just listen. Don’t say I sent you. When you hear something important, make a note of it and come back and tell me. We’ll see whose understanding is fast or slow, mine or Hui-neng’s. And come back right away. Don’t leave me hanging.”

Chih-ch’eng gladly accepted the mission and left, and within half a month he reached Tsaohsi Mountain and met Master Hui-neng. After he paid his respects, he just listened and didn’t say



where he was from. But as soon as Chih-ch'eng heard the Master teach, he understood, and he grasped his original mind. He stood up and bowed and said, "Master, your disciple has come from Yuchuan Temple. At Shen-hsiu's place, I didn't experience any realization. But as soon as I heard the Master speak, I grasped my original mind. I hope the Master will be compassionate enough to instruct me."

Master Hui-neng said, "If that's where you're from, you must be a spy."

Chih-ch'eng said, "I'm not a spy."

The Sixth Patriarch said, "And why not?"

Chih-ch'eng said, "Before I spoke, I was. But now that I've spoken, I'm not."

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

41. The Master told Chih-ch'eng, "I've heard that when your Zen master teaches people, he only gives instruction in morality, meditation, and wisdom. Tell me, what does your master teach people about morality, meditation, and wisdom?"

Chih-ch'eng said, "Concerning morality, meditation, and wisdom, Master Shen-hsiu says not committing evil is morality, doing good is wisdom, and purifying one's thoughts is meditation. This is what he means by 'morality, meditation, and wisdom.' This is his explanation. What is the Master's view?"

Hui-neng replied, "This explanation is wonderful, but my view is different."

Chih-ch'eng asked, "How is it different?"

Hui-neng replied, "Understanding can be fast or slow."

Chih-ch'eng then asked the Master to explain his view of morality, meditation, and wisdom.

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

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 of bigger minds. Once people realize their own nature, they don't differentiate between morality, meditation, and wisdom."

Chih-ch'eng said, "Could the Master please explain why they aren't differentiated?"

The Master said, "Our nature is free of error, free of confusion, and free of ignorance. Prajna shines in every thought and is forever free of attributes. What is there to differentiate? Our nature is something we cultivate directly. It doesn't have any intervening stages, so we don't differentiate any."

Chih-ch'eng bowed and did not leave Tsaohsi Mountain. He became a disciple and was never far from the Master's side.

42. Another monk, named Fa-ta, had been reciting the *Lotus Sutra* for seven years but was bewildered as to its true teaching. So he went to Tsaohsi Mountain to pay his respects and asked the Master, "Your disciple has been reciting the *Lotus Sutra* for seven years, but I'm bewildered as to its true teaching, and I have some questions about the sutra. I was hoping the Master would use his vast wisdom to resolve them."

The Master said, "Fa-ta, the Dharma penetrates the depths, but not your mind. The sutra doesn't have any questions. It's your mind that has questions. You search for the true teaching

with a confused mind, but I uphold the sutra because I practice true mindfulness. All my life I've never been able to read. But if you read the *Lotus* to me once, I'll understand as soon as I hear it."

Fa-ta then read the entire sutra to the Master. As soon as the Sixth Patriarch heard, he understood the Buddha's meaning and explained the *Lotus Sutra* to Fa-ta.

The Sixth Patriarch said, "The *Lotus Sutra* isn't that complicated. Its seven folios contain nothing but lessons in metaphor. The reason the Tathagata expanded his explanation to include the Three Vehicles was simply because people are slow to understand. But the sutra makes it clear that there is no other vehicle than the One Buddha Vehicle."

The Master said, "Fa-ta, pay attention to the One Buddha Vehicle. Don't go looking for the Two Buddha Vehicle and lose your own nature. And where in the sutra are you going to find the One Buddha Vehicle? I'll tell you. The sutra says, 'All buddhas and bhagavans only appear in the world as a result of the greatest of all causes.' How is this teaching to be understood? And how is this teaching to be practiced? Listen, and I will tell you.

When a person's mind has no thoughts and is fundamentally empty and still and free of false views, this is the greatest of all causes—which occurs when you aren't confused about the inside or the outside, when you are free of dualities. If you're confused about the outside, you're attached to forms. If you're confused about the inside, you're attached to emptiness. To be free of form amid forms and to be free of emptiness amid emptiness, this is when you aren't confused about the inside or the outside.

Once you understand this teaching, your mind will develop in

an instant. But what does the mind develop when it appears in the world? It develops the understanding of a buddha. *Buddha* means ‘enlightenment.’ And this can be divided into four doorways: developing the understanding of enlightenment, manifesting the understanding of enlightenment, realizing the understanding of enlightenment, and entering the understanding of enlightenment. Developing, manifesting, realizing, and entering all begin from one place, from the understanding of enlightenment. When you see your own nature, you will appear in the world.”

The Master said, “Fa-ta, I keep hoping that in their minds everyone in the world will develop the understanding of a buddha and not the understanding of an ordinary being. When people’s minds are mistaken, they foolishly engage in evil and develop the understanding of an ordinary being. And when people’s minds are true, they give rise to the light of wisdom and develop the understanding of a buddha. When you don’t develop the understanding of an ordinary being but the understanding of a buddha, that is when you will appear in the world.”

The Master said, “Fa-ta, this is the *Lotus Sutra*’s teaching of One Vehicle, which it then divides into three for the sake of deluded people. But you should only take refuge in the One Buddha Vehicle.”

The Master said, “Fa-ta, 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 develop the understanding of a buddha, you read the *Lotus*. When you develop 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 Fa-ta 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 buddhas.”

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

43. One time a monk named Chih-ch’ang came to Tsaohsi Mountain. After paying his respects to the Master, he asked about the meaning of the Four Vehicles.

Chih-ch’ang said, “The Buddha speaks of the Three Vehicles, but he also talks about the Supreme Vehicle. Your disciple doesn’t understand this and would appreciate your instruction.”

Master Hui-neng said, “Look at your own mind, and don’t cling to the external attributes of dharmas. Originally there was no teaching about the Four Vehicles. But because the capacity of the human mind has four levels, the Dharma has the 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, avoiding nothing except the attributes of dharmas, and remaining free of attainments make up the Supreme Vehicle. The meaning of the Supreme Vehicle consists in the supreme practice. It isn’t something to discuss. You have to practice it. Don’t ask me about it.”

44. There was another monk by the name of Shen-hui. He was from Nanyang. And when he came to Tsaohsi Mountain to pay his respects, he asked, "When the Master meditates, does he see or not?"

The Master got up and hit Shen-hui three times. Then he asked Shen-hui, "When I hit you, did it hurt or not?"

Shen-hui answered, "It hurt and it didn't hurt."

The Sixth Patriarch said, "Well, I see and I don't see."

Shen-hui asked the Master again, "What do you mean, you see and you don't see?"

The Master said, "As for 'I see,' what I always 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 on earth or in heaven. So I see and I don't see. What do you mean, 'It hurt and it didn't hurt'?"

Shen-hui answered, "If it didn't hurt, I would be the same as a lifeless stick or a rock. And if it hurt, I would be the same as an ordinary person still subject to anger."

The Master said, "Shen-hui, this 'do you see or not' just now was dualistic, but 'it hurt and it didn't hurt' was sansaric. You don't see your own nature, and yet you dare to come here and play games."

Shen-hui bowed and didn't dare say anything more. So the Master said, "If you're too deluded to see your own mind, ask a good friend to help you find the way. Only when you understand and see your own mind will you put the Dharma into practice. But you're too deluded to see your own mind. And now you've 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 mine? Why don't you practice,

then ask me if I see or not?”

Shen-hui bowed and became a disciple. He didn't leave Tsaohsi Mountain and was always in attendance.

45. The Master later summoned his disciples Fa-hai, Chih-ch'eng, Fa-ta, Chih-ch'ang, Chih-t'ung, Chih-ch'e, Chih-tao, Fa-chen, Fa-ju, and Shen-hui and said, “You ten disciples come closer. You're not like the others. After I pass into Nirvana, each of you will lead a congregation, so I will teach you how to explain the Dharma without losing sight of its basic principle.

Begin with the teaching of the Three Classifications and make use of the Thirty-six Pairs. But in whatever you state or imply, avoid dualities. Whenever you explain any dharma, don't depart from its nature and attributes. And whenever someone asks you about a dharma, always speak in terms of pairs and hold up its opposite. Since each depends on the other for its existence or non-existence, both dharmas are eventually eliminated, and there is nowhere left 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? These include the Six Realms of Sensation, the Six Senses, and the Six Kinds of Consciousness.

What do the Twelve Ayatanas include? These include the Six Realms of Sensation externally and the Six Senses internally.

What do the Six Realms of Sensation include? These include shape, sound, smell, taste, feeling, and thought.

What do the Six Senses include? These include the eyes, the ears, the nose, the tongue, the body, and the intellect.

In addition to the Six Senses and the Six Realms of Sensation, our dharma nature gives rise to the Six Kinds of Consciousness: eye consciousness, ear consciousness, nose consciousness, tongue consciousness, body consciousness, and mind consciousness.

Because our nature includes ten thousand dharmas, we also call it the Storehouse Consciousness. When we think, we alter our consciousness and give rise to the Six Kinds of Consciousness, which leave through the Six Senses and encounter the Six Realms of Sensation. These three sets of six make eighteen.

When our nature is false, it gives rise to eighteen kinds of falsehood. When our nature is true, it gives rise to eighteen kinds of truth. Who uses them for evil is an ordinary being. Who uses them for good is a buddha. And where does such usage come from? From our nature.

46. As for the pairs of opposites, there are five pairs concerning external, inanimate states: heaven and earth, sun and moon, dark and light, yin and yang, water and fire.

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

There are twenty pairs concerning the functions arising from



our nature: false and true, ignorant and learned, foolish and wise, confused and calm, right and wrong, straight and crooked, full and empty, biased and unbiased, afflicted and enlightened, kind and harmful, joyful and angry, detached and possessive, forward and backward, created and destroyed, permanent and impermanent, dharma body and physical body, manifestation body and realization body, substance and function, nature and attribute, animate and inanimate.

Language and the attributes of dharmas include twelve pairs. External, inanimate states include five pairs. And functions arising from our nature include nineteen pairs. Altogether they form thirty-six pairs. This teaching of Thirty-six Pairs can be used to explain every sutra, as long as you avoid dualities. But how are you to use these thirty-six pairs in regard to your nature?

In speaking with others, remain free of appearances when you explore appearances, and remain free of emptiness when you enter into emptiness. If you become attached to emptiness, you will only increase your ignorance. And if you become attached to appearances, you will only increase your delusions.

And you slander the Dharma if you simply tell people not to use words. If you tell them not to use words, then people shouldn't use language. Language is words. You can say their nature is empty, but the nature of truth is not empty. The deluded only confuse themselves when they get rid of language.

Dark isn't itself dark. It's due to light that it's dark. And light isn't itself light. It's due to dark that it's light. Because light changes into dark, and dark gives rise to light, their appearance and disappearance depend on each other. The Thirty-six Pairs are all like this."

47. The Master said, "Henceforth, when you ten disciples transmit the Dharma, hand down the teaching of the *Platform Sutra* without losing sight of its basic principle. Unless someone has been given the *Platform Sutra*, they do not have my teaching. And now that you have obtained it, pass it on to later generations. For to encounter the *Platform Sutra* is the same as being taught by me personally."

After these ten monks had been so instructed, they copied out the *Platform Sutra* and passed it on to later generations. Those who obtain it are sure to see their nature.

48. The Master passed into Nirvana on the third day of the eighth month in the second year of the Hsientung Era. On the eighth day of the seventh month, he called his disciples together to say good-bye. In the first year of the Hsientung Era, he built a stupa at Kuo-en Temple in Hsinchou. And 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 answer them for you. Let me put an end to your delusions so that you can know joy. After I leave, there will be no one to teach you."

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

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

The monks all bowed and asked the Master to leave them with this gatha, which they received with reverence. The gatha went:

"Nothing that exists is true  
don't think what you see is true  
if you think you see the true  
what you see is surely false  
if you want to find the true  
the mind free of the false is true  
unless your mind forsakes the false  
nothing is true where true can't be.

Living things know how to move  
lifeless things stay still  
those who practice staying still  
resemble motionless lifeless things  
to see what truly doesn't move  
in movement find what doesn't move  
what doesn't move is what doesn't move  
lifeless things have no buddha seeds.

If you can perceive its attributes  
the ultimate truth doesn't move  
if you can realize this  
you will see how reality works

all you students of the Way  
be relentless and concentrate  
don't stand at the entrance of the Mahayana  
clinging to views about birth and death.

If those before you are ready  
tell them the Buddha's teaching  
and if they aren't truly ready  
bow and tell them to be good  
there's nothing to argue about in this teaching  
those who argue lose sight of the Way  
clinging to blindness arguing about teachings  
they lead their nature into birth and death."

49. Upon hearing and understanding the Master's wishes, the monks no longer dared engage in disputes but practiced in accordance with the Dharma. Realizing the Master did not have long to live, they all bowed as one. The venerable Fa-hai then 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 for it. But more than twenty years after my passing, false teachings will create confusion and misrepresent the principle of our school. Someone will then come forward without concern for their own life, and they will distinguish the true Buddhist teachings from the false, and they will raise high the principle of our school and my true Dharma.

As for the robe, it isn't right to pass it on. If you don't believe me, let me recite the 'Transmission of the Robe and Teaching Songs' of the previous five patriarchs. According to the 'Song of the First Patriarch, Bodhidharma,' it isn't right to transmit the robe. Listen, and I'll recite them for you:

***The Song of the First Patriarch, Master  
Bodhidharma***

The reason I came to the land of T'ang  
was to teach and save deluded beings  
to be a flower that unfolds five petals  
from which a fruit ripens naturally.

***The Song of the Second Patriarch, Master Hui-k'o***

In the beginning because there was ground  
a flower was planted and bloomed  
if in the future there is no ground  
where will flowers come from?

***The Song of the Third Patriarch, Master Seng-ts'an***

Flower seeds need to have ground  
from the ground is how flowers grow  
but if a seed lacks the nature to grow  
even in the ground it won't grow.

***The Song of the Fourth Patriarch, Master Tao-hsin***

Flower seeds have the nature to grow  
they grow when they're planted in the ground  
but if karmic causes don't come together  
nothing at all will grow.

***The Song of the Fifth Patriarch, Master Hung-jen***

A sentient being plants a seed  
an insentient flower blooms  
without sentient beings or seeds  
the mind would be a barren ground.

***The Song of the Sixth Patriarch, Master Hui-neng***

The ground of the mind contains living seeds  
when the Dharma rains flowers grow  
once you find a flower's living seeds  
the fruit of enlightenment follows."

50. Master Hui-neng said, "Listen to 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.

***Verse One:***

A false flower grows from the ground of the mind  
five petals unfold from its stem  
together committing ignorant deeds  
blown apart by karmic winds.

***Verse Two:***

A true flower grows from the ground of the mind  
five petals unfold from its stem  
together cultivating prajna wisdom  
the enlightenment of buddhas to come."

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

51. 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."

Fa-hai asked, "From ancient times until now, how many generations have passed down the Dharma of this direct teaching?"

The Sixth Patriarch said, “It was first passed down by the Seven Buddhas. Shakyamuni Buddha was the seventh, Mahakashyapa the eighth, Ananda the ninth, Madhyantika the tenth, Shamakavasa the eleventh, Upagupta the twelfth, Dhritaka the thirteenth, Buddhanandi the fourteenth, Buddhmitra the fifteenth, Parshva the sixteenth, Punyayasha the seventeenth, Ashvaghosha the eighteenth, Kapimala the nineteenth, Nagarjuna the twentieth, Kamadeva the twenty-first, Rahulata the twenty-second, Sanghanandi the twenty-third, Gayashata the twenty-fourth, Kumarata the twenty-fifth, Jayata the twenty-sixth, Vasubandhu the twenty-seventh, Manorhita the twenty-eighth, Haklenayashas the twenty-ninth, Simha-bhikshu the thirtieth, Shamavasa the thirty-first, Upagupta the thirty-second, Sangharaksha the thirty-third, Shubhamitra the thirty-fourth, and Bodhidharma, the third son of a king of Southern India, was the thirty-fifth.

In the kingdom of T’ang, Hui-k’o was the thirty-sixth, Seng-tsan the thirty-seventh, Tao-hsin the thirty-eighth, Hung-jen the thirty-ninth, and I am now the fortieth to have received the Dharma.”

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

52. Fa-hai 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 sentient being is, they’ll be able to see a buddha. If they don’t understand what a sentient being is, they can look for a buddha for ten thousand

kalpas and still not find one. So I will tell you how to understand what a sentient being is and how to see a buddha. And I will also leave you with a verse called ‘The Liberation of Seeing the True Buddha.’ As long as a person is deluded, they won’t see a buddha—only someone who is awake will.”

Fa-hai said, “If we could hear this, it will be passed down without interruption from one generation to the next.”

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 to understand what a sentient being is, and they will be able to understand what a buddha is. Buddhas are due to sentient beings. Apart from a sentient being, there is no buddha-mind.

‘Deluded a buddha is a being  
enlightened a being is a buddha  
a foolish buddha is a being  
a wise being is a buddha  
a biased buddha is a being  
an unbiased being is a buddha  
as long as your mind is biased  
the buddha dwells in a being  
the moment you wake up unbiased  
a being becomes a buddha  
your mind contains a buddha  
your buddha is the real one  
if you didn’t have the buddha-mind  
where would you go to find a buddha?’”

53. The Master said, “You disciples, be well. I will leave you with a verse called ‘The Liberation of Seeing the Real Buddha of Your Nature.’ If deluded people in future ages understand the meaning of this verse, they will see the real buddha of their own



mind and their own nature. After I give you this verse, I will leave you:

‘The pure nature of suchness is the real buddha  
the Three Poisons of falsehood are the real mara  
people who see falsely have a mara in their house  
people who see truly have a buddha as their guest.

When the Three Poisons of falsehood appear in your  
nature  
the King of All Maras makes himself at home  
when true views drive the Poisons from your mind  
the mara becomes a buddha, a real one not a false one.

The transformation, realization, and the dharma body  
all three bodies basically are one  
if you search inside you this is what you’ll find  
the cause of enlightenment that leads to buddhahood.

From the transformation body your pure nature rises  
your pure nature dwells in the transformation body  
and leads you down the path of truth  
where future perfection has no limit.

The nature of defilement is the cause of purity  
there is no pure body in the absence of defilement  
just keep your nature free of the Five Desires  
the moment you see your nature it is real.

If the direct teaching makes sense to you this life  
you will understand before you is a buddha

if you try to find a buddha through your practice  
I wonder where you'll find one that's real.

If you can find something real inside yourself  
this something real is the cause of buddhahood  
don't look for a buddha outside what is real  
all those who go in search for one are fools.

This direct teaching came here from the West  
but liberating others is up to you to practice  
I urge you students of the Way today  
don't act so depressed when you hear this.”

After he finished reciting this gatha, 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 and accepting condolence money and wearing mourning garments. That would not be the Buddhist Way. And you would not be my disciples. Act the same as when I was 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 at ease and at peace. That is the Great Way. After I'm gone, just practice in accordance with the Dharma, the same as when I was with you. And 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.

54. The day the Master passed into Nirvana, the monastery was filled with a wonderful fragrance that lasted for several 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 Tsaohsi Mountain. After he was interred inside a dragon urn, a bright light shone forth and illuminated the sky overhead for three days before it faded. And Magistrate Wei Ch'u of Shaochou erected a memorial stele where offerings are still made today.

55. This *Platform Sutra* was compiled by the venerable Fa-hai. Before he died, he gave it to his colleague Tao-chi. And before Tao-chi died, he gave it to his disciple Wu-chen. Wu-chen currently lives in Lingnan at Fahsing Monastery on Tsaohsi Mountain, where he still transmits this teaching.

56. If this teaching is passed on, it must be to someone of superior wisdom who deeply believes the teaching of the Buddha. Those who have based themselves on its great compassion and who have taken this sutra as their authority continue to do so today.

57. This monk is a native of Shaochou's Chuchiang County. 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 real example of its practice / only taught to those with wisdom / who then explain it to liberate fools.

But only those transmit this teaching who vow to practice and who don't retreat from difficulty and who are able to bear hardship and who are rich in blessings and virtue. If their 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 hidden meaning.

*The Platform Sutra of the Direct Teaching of the Southern School of the Supreme Mahayana* in one volume.



## Introduction

LIFE IS IMPORTANT. And death is important. And so is liberation from life and death. This is something we all deal with sooner or later, but it isn't something we all deal with equally well. The *Platform Sutra* is the response of a Chinese monk named Hui-neng. As it has come down to us, this book has passed through the hands and minds of millions of people throughout East Asia, and it has been revered as no other Chinese Buddhist text. It is the only Chinese text ranked alongside the sutras of the Buddha.

Hui-neng was the Sixth Patriarch of China's Zen sect. And over the centuries, he has become the most venerated teacher of one of the world's great spiritual traditions. He was born in 638 in a small town in the southernmost part of China, not far from what is now Hong Kong, and he died in the same town in 713. The text that contains his teaching was first compiled sometime between 700 and 720 by his disciple Fa-hai, and it was titled the *Platform Sutra* because the sermon that forms its heart was delivered from a raised platform before an audience numbering in the thousands. Ever since it was put together, it has been the most studied, the most quoted, the most influential of all the texts that teach that branch of Mahayana Buddhism known as Zen.

The text that makes up this sutra has been handed down from one generation of Zen practitioners to the next for thirteen

hundred years now. But no one gave much thought to the history of its transmission until about eighty years ago. In 1923, the Japanese Buddhist scholar Yabuki Keiki was looking through the manuscripts from the Tunhuang/Dunhuang Caves in the collection of the British Museum. And in the course of his research, he found a copy of the *Platform Sutra* that was quite different from the Tsungpao edition preserved in the Chinese Buddhist Canon. The copy Keiki found was only about two-thirds as long, and its internal arrangement was quite different. A subsequent analysis of its paper and calligraphy suggested it was far older than any previously known copy, and those who specialize in such matters concluded it had been written around 850, perhaps even earlier. Other scholars, citing textual details, pushed back the date of the edition it represented even further, to between 733 and 801. After spending a number of years studying the copy found at Tunhuang, Philip Yampolsky, preferring the more conservative assessment, concluded: "We can safely say that the Tunhuang version of the *Platform Sutra* was made between 830 and 860, and represented a copy of an earlier version, some of whose material dates to around 780."(*The Platform Sutra of the Sixth Patriarch*, p. 98)

When Keiki found this early copy, it was listed as manuscript S5475. The number indicated its order among the thousands of documents brought back from the Silk Road oasis of Tunhuang by Aurel Stein. And the "S" was for Stein. The copy Stein brought back to England contained hundreds of errors, but Keiki managed to produce an edited version, which he also divided into fifty-seven sections to make it easier to study and discuss. The resulting edition was included in Volume 48 of the Taisho edition of the Buddhist Canon published in Japan in 1928.

Several years later, Daisetz Suzuki went through the text again, and in 1934 he published a much better edition. Although Suzuki retained Keiki's earlier division of the text into fifty-seven sections, his edition incorporated numerous corrections based mostly on the Tsungpao edition in the Ming-dynasty Buddhist Canon. Suzuki's edition was later translated into English by Wing-tsit Chan in 1963 as *The Platform Scripture* and again by Philip Yampolsky in 1967 as *The Platform Sutra of the Sixth Patriarch*. As far as I know, these are the only two English translations of the copy edited by Keiki and Suzuki. All other translations into English, and there have been a dozen or so, beginning with Wong Mou-lam's in 1930, have been based on different versions of the Tsungpao edition.

The discovery of this early copy in the British Museum and the realization that the text had undergone considerable development since it was first compiled led scholars to examine the collections in other archives. And over the next few years, copies of the sutra first edited in 967 by a Chinese monk named Hui-hsin were found in several monasteries in Japan. This Huihsin edition was quite similar to the one on which the Tunhuang copies were based. But it did contain some significant differences. Another edition also came to light, or at least enough passages to reconstruct it. This edition, which was compiled by the Chinese monk Ch'i-sung in the year 1056, was a much larger edition and much closer in content and arrangement to the Tsungpao edition in current use. Copies of other editions were also found, including one translated in 1071 into the Hsihsia language of what is now the Ninghsia Autonomous Region. And not only were early editions of the sutra itself found but also other texts that quoted from it or that referred to it. As a result of all this material, we now have a

much better idea of how this text might have developed, with the emphasis on “might.”

The text everyone has used since anyone can remember was the one edited by the Chinese monk Tsung-pao in 1291. But based on the materials that have been found and examined over the past century, we can now see that the text Tsung-pao compiled was for the most part based on the edition authored by Ch’i-sung in 1056. And we can also trace this edition back to the edition compiled by Hui-hsin in 967. Although this is a little like tracing the ancestry of the human race and involves just as much guesswork, as well as an oversimplification of what might have actually happened, we can at least see how the editions of Hui-hsin, Ch’i-sung, and Tsung-pao could have evolved from the edition on which the Tunhuang copy (c. 780) was based.

It should be noted, however, that other scenarios are also possible. The venerable Jinghui, the current vice director of the Buddhist Association of China, has presented a well-reasoned and well-supported account showing how the Tsungpao edition can also be viewed as closer to the “original” text and how the Tunhuang edition can be seen to have been corrupted by the followers of Shen-hui (cf. *T’an-ching-yi-ti*, pp. 209-219).

But regardless of which scenario we choose, what we still don’t know is if there ever was an “original” text. In the *Chuantenglu* (28), Hui-chung (d. 775) laments that in his time the *Platform Sutra* had already undergone changes he thought unfortunate. Thus, we can assume that by the second half of the eighth century, there were at least several versions of this text being passed around and that the edition that ended up in Tunhuang was only one of them.

Although it doesn’t help resolve this issue, there is one more



copy that needs to be mentioned. In 1943, when the Chinese scholar Xiang Da traveled to Tunhuang for the purpose of research, a local scholar named Ren Ziyi showed him a copy of the *Platform Sutra* he had found in 1935 at Shangssu Temple in the Chienfotung Caves southeast of town. Xiang Da reported this in an article he published in 1950. But this was not a good time to be studying Buddhist documents in China. And when other scholars inquired about the whereabouts of the manuscript, it couldn't be found.

It wasn't until 1986, when Zhou Shaoliang, then vice director of the Buddhist Association of China, was going through the archives of the Tunhuang County Museum, that Ren Ziyi's copy reappeared. It had been catalogued in the museum's collection as manuscript #77 and was part of a group of manuscripts Ren Ziyi had given the museum for safekeeping. Later that same year, Zhou published photographs of the text in the Zen section of the *Zhong-guo fo-jiao zung-shu* edited by Ren Jiyu. And in 1993, the Chinese Buddhist scholar Yang Zengwen published an annotated edition of the text and followed this up with another edition in 2001 that was accompanied by a great deal of background material.

The reason why this second Tunhuang copy of the sutra has become so important is because it is not only a copy of the same edition and roughly from the same period (c. 780), thus confirming the first copy's authenticity and probable date, but it is far superior. Instead of the sometimes illegible scrawl of the first copy, the calligraphy of the second copy is quality work. And instead of the hundreds of mistakes and omissions, the second copy is nearly perfect. And where it does err, it includes some of the same mistakes of the first copy, thus attesting to the existence of a previous edition from which both were copied. It

is on this second Tunhuang copy that I have based my translation.

As a result of this series of discoveries, we are now in a much better position to consider the development of this sutra. Although we have no evidence of what the original text might have looked like, or if there ever was an ur-text, based on my own study of the sutra, I would suggest the following scenario as the most likely sequence for its development. And for ease of comparison, I have retained the same division of the text into fifty-seven sections used by Keiki and Suzuki as well as by Chan and Yampolsky.

Sections 1-37 of the sutra were most likely compiled during Huineng's lifetime, or shortly after his death in 713. These sections are based on a talk, or series of talks, he delivered in Shaokuan involving the transmission of precepts and the basic teaching of Zen. Sections 38-48 were added shortly after his death, probably around 720-730, in order to elevate the status of a select group of disciples who had themselves become teachers. No doubt, these additions were based on records made by the individuals concerned, or by their disciples, who appended them to the text as it existed at the time. Finally, portions of Sections 49-57 were added around 750-760 by the followers of Shen-hui to elevate the status of their teacher, and of themselves as well. It is also likely that some portions of this final group of sections were already part of the earlier versions of the text, as they recount Hui-neng's last days and final instructions. And sometime before 801 (the reasons for this cutoff date appear in my commentary to Sections 49 and 51), the edition containing Sections 1-57 was compiled in the form in which it eventually reached Tunhuang. Meanwhile, the text continued to be reworked, as monks such as Hui-hsin and Ch'i-

sung rewrote or rearranged the text to suit their own sense of literary style and sequence of materials and added to it as well. And thus we have the series of editions noted above culminating with that of Tsung-pao.

Although the text edited by Tsung-pao is just about the only edition people have read for the past seven hundred years, in my opinion it represents the culmination of the process of embellishment that Hui-chung was complaining about five hundred years earlier. And it is for this reason that I have based my translation instead on the Tunhuang edition. Although this edition, too, includes its own embellishments, those parts that have been added or altered are easy to discern and not hard to separate from the sutra's essential teaching.

Still, readers should be able to judge this matter for themselves. Hence, I have listed significant differences among the various editions in my commentary and textual notes and have translated passages absent from the Tunhuang edition but present in the Tsungpao edition so that readers might see how the text developed over time. Also, the long series of conversations that appear in Chapters Seven and Nine of the Tsungpao edition and that would have been too distracting to place in the commentary or textual notes have been moved to the Appendix, where readers will also find a table cross-referencing the fifty-seven sections of the Tunhuang edition with the ten chapters of the Tsungpao edition. Finally, in addition to an index of Chinese names and terms, I have added the Chinese text of the Tunhuang Museum copy on which my translation is based. It is essentially the same as the text edited by Yang Zengwen, although I have made a few minor changes.

Before we consider the contents of this sutra, another matter that needs to be addressed is its authenticity. Does it fairly

portray the teaching of Hui-neng, or is it the work of someone else using Huineng's name to put forth their own interpretation of Zen? This idea was first suggested by the Chinese scholar Hu Shih in the 1930s, not long after the discovery of the first Tunhuang copy of this sutra. The reason behind Hu's contention was his discovery of other documents from Tunhuang that contained the teaching of Hui-neng's disciple, Shen-hui. Because these documents contained passages identical to those in the *Platform Sutra*, Hu put forward the argument, supported by a number of other convergent materials, that the sutra contained the teaching of Shen-hui and not Hui-neng. This was a brash, and certainly controversial, claim. But it was, in fact, typical of Hu Shih. His efforts in convincing his fellow countrymen that vernacular Chinese possessed literary merit had already established his credentials as an iconoclast. A number of sympathetic scholars in Japan and America accepted Hu's arguments, and some still do. However, most Buddhist scholars in China and Taiwan have rejected them as unlikely, if not impossible—certainly impossible to prove. Scholars such as Guo Peng, Ts'ai Nien-sheng, and Yang Zengwen, to name only those whose books have ended up in my library, have examined the same evidence and have concluded that it was the student who was quoting the teacher and not the other way around.

I have to step back at this point. Recounting the convoluted textual arguments involved in this matter is not something I feel like doing and probably not something more than a handful of readers would want to wade through—and my apologies to all those who would. Personally, I'd rather garden. Or, isn't it time for tea?

What such discussions inevitably come down to is this: A certain statement, phrase, or citation is suspect because the text,

stele, or inscription in which it occurs is corrupt or unreliable. And this other statement is not suspect because the text in which it occurs is less corrupt and more reliable. And this one is reliable, and the other is unreliable, because this other document says so, or at least would seem to say so. And how could it be otherwise? But what scholars who assess the detritus of human history, and those who accept their pronouncements, often forget is that people are human.

When I was a graduate student in the Anthropology Department at Columbia University, I once asked Margaret Mead about this. Her early ethnographic work in Samoa had come under attack by other anthropologists who had visited the same village where she had done her fieldwork. They had come up with different results. So I asked her about this. She shrugged and said people tell different stories. Everyone has a different view of what's going on. Objective truth doesn't even exist in the so-called physical sciences, much less in the social sciences. In the study of human culture we can't talk about the truth. All we can talk about are stories: your story, my story, the most likely story, the best story. She asked me if I had ever seen the movie *Rashomon*. It's about how we're all storytellers, she said. That's what language is for. And that's what life is for: sixty, maybe seventy years to work out our stories of who we are.

And that's the way I still look at all this. Some stories are better than others, but they're just stories. I suggest readers keep this in mind when considering claims about events involving humans. It's part of an academic's job to propose a theory and to outfit it with a wardrobe of facts and to walk it down the catwalk of possibility. And it's the reader's job to view what academics propose with the brightest light available and to make their own judgment concerning the professor's new clothes.

Diane Arbus once said of her own art, “A photograph is a secret about a secret. The more it tells you, the less you know.” Can a story about a story be any different?

So, are these the words of Hui-neng? Does the New Testament record the words of Jesus Christ? Or does the Koran quote the prophet Mohammed? These are issues that faith alone can decide. All we know for sure is we have a book that claims to contain the words of Hui-neng and we have two copies of an edition that was compiled during the same century he lived in. And we know one thing more. We know that if this book does not contain the words of Hui-neng, it at least contains the words of someone who was his equal as a teacher of Zen. This has been attested by millions of practitioners who have used this book as their spiritual guide for more than a thousand years.

This brings us now to the teaching that Hui-neng taught. Normally, readers would expect an explanation of the various concepts that appear in this text. Normally, this is what we think a teaching consists of: concepts, ideas, constructs of the mind and the relationships among them. But Hui-neng’s teaching is not a teaching of concepts, just the opposite. It is, instead, a teaching of no concepts. Hui-neng addresses an audience numbering in the thousands, and every word he speaks is directed at freeing people of whatever concepts block their awareness of their own nature. This is the teaching of Hui-neng: See your nature and become a buddha. The rest is simply an attempt at deconstruction, the deconstruction of the walls that imprison us in our dungeons of delusion—including the delusions that arise in the course of studying and practicing the teachings of the Buddha.

If, after having read this sutra, readers think they have gained something, then they will have misunderstood it. We cannot gain

what we already have. Or if readers think they have lost something, that they have been held up at mind-point and robbed of their most treasured conceptions, then they too will have misunderstood it. We cannot lose what we don't have. All we have is our buddha nature. To claim that this sutra teaches anything more than this would be to add feet to a snake.

Ever since I first read this sutra over thirty years ago, I have hoped to produce a translation. The language seemed so deceptively simple and yet so profound. But my periodic plans to do so have inevitably been sidetracked by other work, and also by a sense of not being ready. Recently, after finishing a translation of the *Heart Sutra*, I resumed work on a second draft of the *Lankavatara*, the draft that usually begins to make sense. But less than a month later, I needed to check a reference in the *Platform Sutra*. The copy I had was Ting Fupao's edition of the text, and it was one of my favorite companions when I was living at Haiming Monastery in Taiwan in the mid-1970s. I hadn't opened it in years, and the book literally fell apart in my hands. As I started picking up the pages, I saw the minuscule notes and tentative translation I had written in pencil in the margins thirty years earlier. It was like meeting an old friend from the past. Tears came to my eyes. I'm so easily moved. I had a room that overlooked the monastery's magnolia tree, and I used to sit there in bed at my window and read this book oblivious to what was going on in the world. And I thought I was the luckiest person in the world to encounter such a teacher as Hui-neng. So after collecting the pages on my floor and putting the book back together, I gathered up the editions of the *Lanka* on my desk and put them back on the shelf, and I started working on the *Platform Sutra*. That was nearly a year ago. And now it's time to say good-bye again. You could walk a million miles and not

meet a better friend.

Red Pine

New Year's Day, Year of the Dog

Port Townsend, Washington



# The Platform Sutra with Commentary



*The Mahaprajnaparamita Sutra of the Direct Teaching  
of the Southern School of the Supreme Mahayana,  
The Platform Sutra*

**Delivered at Tahan Temple in Shaozhou by the Sixth Patriarch, Master Hui-neng, in one volume, compiled and recorded by Fa-hai, recipient of the Formless Precepts and advocate of the Dharma.**

*Mahaprajnaparamita Sutra.* The advent of the Prajnaparamita teaching in the second century B.C. signaled the beginning of Mahayana Buddhism, with its emphasis on the attainment of enlightenment rather than nirvana and its greater inclusion of laity in the pursuit of such a goal. *Maha* is Sanskrit for “great,” and *prajnaparamita* can mean “perfection of wisdom” or “transcendent wisdom.” In either case, this refers to the wisdom by means of which we see what is real, the way things really are.

The *Mahaprajnaparamita Sutra* is the title of an

encyclopedic collection of Perfection of Wisdom texts translated into Chinese by Hsuan-tsang in the middle of the seventh century. Thus, the editor is not only likening this text to its Indian counterparts, he is also claiming for it a similar stature in the Chinese pantheon of sacred texts.

**Direct Teaching of the Southern School.** The terms “direct” and “indirect” were used by Tao-sheng (355-434) as early as the fourth century, when he argued that realization is both instantaneous and complete. But the description of a teaching as “direct” did not occur until Hui-neng used this term to distinguish his understanding of Zen from that of others, such as Shen-hsiu. As was the case with the use of the term *Hinayana* by the early Mahayana, this was aimed at establishing ascendancy over something that did not necessarily exist in the manner claimed. The differences were probably more personal than ideological and partly a result of tension over who was the rightful heir of the Fifth Patriarch. Still, there were differences, not only in doctrine but also in politics. Shen-hsiu’s base of support was in North China among the elite in the capitals of Loyang and Ch’ang-an, while Hui-neng’s center of support was in South China in an area that was still largely unsinicized and where officials were often men who had been banished there. Thus, the Northern-Southern distinction was also one that involved insider versus outsider.

**Supreme Mahayana.** This was an appellation intended to distinguish this teaching as not only superior to the teaching of early Buddhist sects that focused their practice on the Abhidharma, or Study of Dharmas, but also superior to the teaching of other Mahayana sects, such as the Pure Land sect.

The same term was also used by the Fifth Patriarch, Hung-jen, to describe his own teaching.

***The Platform Sutra.*** The Huihsin edition (967) titles this *The Platform Sutra of the Sixth Patriarch*; the Chisung edition (1056) titles it *The Original Tsaohsi Edition of the Dharma Jewel Platform Sutra of the Great Master and Sixth Patriarch*; the Tsungpao edition (1291) has *The Dharma Jewel Platform Sutra of the Great Master and Sixth Patriarch*. Both Tunhuang copies (c. 780) have the more descriptive title used here.

**Platform.** As early as the fifth century, Buddhists in China built raised platforms of wood or bricks or simply earth for use in the transmission of monastic or lay precepts to large numbers of people.

In this case, Hui-neng confers on his audience the Formless Precepts of the Southern School of Zen. Since every precept ceremony involves lectures on the meaning and importance of the code by which Buddhists follow the spiritual path, these platforms were also viewed as equivalent to the place where a person experiences enlightenment. And the term *chieh-t'an*: “precept platform” was often used interchangeably with the term *tao-ch'ang*: “mandala.”

**Sutra.** A sutra normally contains the sermons of a buddha or a buddha's disciples. Although no one knows who bestowed such a distinction on this text, it is the only Chinese Buddhist text that has been so honored. This is also an indication of the extent to which Hui-neng's followers went to elevate their master's teachings above the teachings of all other Chinese Buddhists.

**Tafan Temple.** Tafan Temple was located on a narrow peninsula several hundred meters north of the confluence of the Chenchiang and Wuchiang rivers, where they form the Peijiang, or North River. The town of Shaochou was located across from the peninsula on the east bank of the Chenchiang River. A Buddhist shrine was first built on the peninsula sometime before 660. It has had many names since then, but it was not called Tafan (Great Purity) until 760-780, when a high official gave it this name. Hence, this edition of the sutra could not have been compiled before that date. The temple was moved several hundred meters from its original location during the Sung dynasty following a flood, and its name was changed to Tachien (Great Mirror), by which it has been known ever since.

**Shaochou.** Now known as Shaokuan, this was the administrative center for the northern part of what is now Kuangtung province. It is located 220 kilometers north of Kuangchou (Canton) on the main train line to Beijing.

**Fa-hai.** Almost nothing is known about this monk, other than that he was from Chuchiang, where Tsaohsi Mountain was located and where Hui-neng taught for more than forty years. In Section 45 of this sutra, he is listed as one of Hui-neng's ten leading disciples. And in Section 55, his name appears as the editor of this text.

**Formless Precepts.** This represents Hui-neng's attempt to encourage his audience to transcend the normal interpretation of precepts as restrictions on behavior. In Section 17, Hui-neng says that "no form' means externally to be free of all forms." The traditional Buddhist understanding of precepts is a set of

rules that prevents bad deeds and encourages good deeds. Thus, from the very beginning, this sutra establishes Hui-neng's teaching as beyond the confines of mere formality. Hui-neng's unique interpretation of the precepts appears in Sections 20 through 23 of this sutra and is clearly based on the teaching of the Prajnaparamita he inherited from the Fourth and Fifth Patriarchs.

**Textual note:** The title of the Tsungpao edition, as noted above, is *The Dharma Jewel Platform Sutra of the Great Master and Sixth Patriarch* . The longer title, as it appears in both Tunhuang copies, is also listed among the sutras brought back to Japan in 847 by Ennin.

## **PART I (SECTIONS 1-11)**

**1. Master Hui-neng took his seat in the lecture hall of Tafa Temple to expound the teaching of Mahaprajnaparamita and to transmit the Formless Precepts. Seated below him on that occasion were more than ten thousand monks, nuns, and laypeople, along with Magistrate Wei Ch'u of Shaozhou and more than thirty officials and thirty scholars. Together they asked the Master to explain the teaching of Mahaprajnaparamita.**

**The magistrate then instructed the Master's disciple Fa-hai to make a record to pass down to future generations so that students of the Way who carry on its guiding principle and who transmit it to others might have this testament as their authority.**

Buddhist sutras usually begin with one of the Buddha's disciples asking a question. Here, an audience that includes clerics and laity and headed by the highest regional official requests a lecture on the basic principles of Mahayana Buddhism, a teaching known as Prajnaparamita, or the Perfection of Wisdom. As taught by Huineng, this is the practice of formlessness, the practice that cannot be defined in terms of form because it arises from our own nature and not from a set of externally imposed rules.

This is the rarest of all occasions. Of all the world's treasures, nothing is more valuable than the truth. But not all those who understand the truth are able to teach it. And not all those who seek instruction in the truth are able to encounter it, much less understand it. Hence, this written record was made for future

ages when such a teaching might be hard to find.

**Master Hui-neng took his seat.** The name Hui-neng means “Wise and Able.” According to the preface to this sutra attributed to Fa-hai, this name was given to Hui-neng by two monks who suddenly appeared at his home the night of his birth. They told his father, “*Hui* means he will bestow the *wisdom* of the Dharma on all beings.” And *neng* means he will be *able* to perform the deeds of a buddha. The date of this talk, or series of talks, is unknown. Hui-neng did not move to the Shaochou area until the spring of 677, shortly after becoming a monk. And it probably would have required a residence of more than ten years to draw such a large audience. I would guess this occurred within a decade either way of 700. The first thirty-seven sections read as if they were delivered on one occasion and probably formed the original text, to which the remaining sections were added later to include teachings omitted from the original edition and to establish the legitimacy of Hui-neng’s disciples as the true inheritors of the Dharma of Zen.

**To transmit the Formless Precepts.** Normally, the transmission of monastic and lay precepts requires a period of residence and instruction at a monastery or nunnery. However, during the T’ang dynasty, Buddhist monks sometimes resorted to transmitting the lay precepts to audiences numbering in the thousands in order to raise funds for monastery construction.

**Seated below him.** Chairs were only used for special occasions and for persons of status in ancient China. Otherwise, everyone sat on the floor, either on straw mats or cushions.

**Ten thousand.** The Huihsin, Chisung, and Tsungpao editions all have “one thousand.”

**Magistrate Wei Ch’u.** In the Chinese bureaucracy, a magistrate was the chief official for a region that varied in size but that included at least several counties. In this case, the region administered included a large part of northern Kuangtung province. The administrative center was located in Shaochou because that was where the two main transportation routes from the north met before continuing south to the seaport of Kuangchou. According to the Ch’ing-dynasty edition of the *Kuangtung Provincial Gazetteer*, Wei Ch’u became prefect of Shaochou in 713, the same year Hui-neng died (12:16b). And according to a memorial inscription written by the T’ang-dynasty prime minister Chang Chiu-ling, Wei died at his post in Shaochou in 718 and was buried nearby (*Chung-kuo-ch’an-tung-shih*). The *Transmission of the Lamp* (5) also lists Wei among Hui-neng’s dharma heirs but gives no other information. Since the sermons that make up this sutra were delivered years, if not a decade or more, before Wei became magistrate, his position here has apparently been elevated to reflect his final official rank, which was a common practice among Chinese hagiographers.

**The teaching of Mahaprajnaparamita.** Our mundane worldly wisdom admits the existence of objects, from subatomic particles to galaxies, while the metaphysical wisdom of early Buddhists denied the existence of objects but not the existence of dharmas, or entities of the mind. However, the transcendent wisdom of the Prajnaparamita not only denies the existence of objects but also the existence of dharmas—as well as their non-



existence. In place of their existence or non-existence, this teaching advocates the realization of the emptiness of objects and dharmas. It asks us to realize that the existence or non-existence of any object or dharma is a projection of the mind, that any entity can only be said to exist or not exist in relation to other entities, and that true understanding sees through the imaginary barriers we use to separate, and thus define, beings, things, ideas, and, of course, ourselves. The Prajnaparamita shows us the true nature of things. It shows us their emptiness. In short, the Prajnaparamita teaches us that what is real is the absence of the fiction of self-existence. The absence of fiction is the truth, the truth of emptiness, but an emptiness that binds us together with all things and all beings, with all entities of the mind. This teaching is described as *maha* because it is “great.”

**To make a record.** Not only are we told the occasion for the teaching that follows, we are also assured that what follows is an authentic account compiled by one of Hui-neng’s senior disciples. The Chinese have been assiduous record keepers for well over two thousand years, and it was quite normal for lectures to be recorded by scribes.

**Students of the Way.** In ancient China, everyone used the word *Tao*, even Confucius. And when Buddhism first arrived in China, it was simply viewed as a foreign variety of Taoism. Thus, the word *Tao*, or Way, was used to translate the Sanskrit word *Dharma*, and this usage remained in effect, despite the subsequent realization that there were significant differences between Buddhism and Taoism.

**As their authority.** The presence of a great teacher is a great

blessing, but it also places a great burden on disciples, who usually feel compelled to prepare for the teacher's absence. Hence, such texts as this have been compiled and handed down. Still, this or any other text can only point the way. And Hui-neng's teaching was clearly intended to free us of external authorities.

I'm not completely satisfied with my translation here of *pingch'eng* as "authority," but the alternatives are even less satisfactory. This term was used in the transmission of government orders and meant something like "commission" or "mandate." But it was also used (and this is why it is being used here) in the transmission of monastic and lay precepts. Other possible renderings include "empowerment" and even "endowment." The same term occurs again, along with its synonym, *ping-shou*, in Section 38, at the beginning of another of the four distinct parts of the sutra.

**Textual note:** There are two major differences between the Tunhuang and later versions of this section. One such difference is that later editions preface this passage with a sentence in which the magistrate and his fellow officials first go to Paolin Monastery, sixteen kilometers south of Shaochou, and invite Hui-neng to Tafa Temple. Another difference is that the second paragraph is absent from later editions.

**2. When he spoke this *Platform Sutra*, Master Hui-neng said, "Good friends, purify your minds by reciting the teaching of Mahaprajnaparamita." Then the Master stopped speaking, while he purified his own mind.**

After a long time, he spoke again, "Good friends, please listen. My kind-hearted father was originally from

**Fanyang. But he was dismissed from office and banished to Lingnan and lived in Hsinchou as a commoner. My father died when I was quite young. And my widowed and destitute mother moved to Nanhai, where I experienced hardship and poverty and sold firewood in the marketplace.**

The teaching around which this sutra turns is the teaching expressed in such Prajnaparamita texts as the *Diamond* and *Heart Sutras*. This is the teaching that points us back to ourselves, to our own minds rather than to a conceptual labyrinth. Thus, Hui-neng asks his audience to clear their minds by reciting a summary of this teaching—a summary such as that found at the end of the *Heart* or *Diamond Sutras*.

It might seem curious that a lecture on one of the most profound teachings of Buddhism should begin with an autobiographical sketch. But it is usual in Buddhist sutras to have an account of the significant events in the career of a bodhisattva prior to their buddhahood. And Hui-neng's disciples certainly considered their teacher to be an enlightened being. Also, this allows the compiler a chance to provide followers of this teaching with enough information to flesh out, and thus imagine, an example of its realization. Finally, it is one of the hallmarks of Zen that its teaching not be separated from our everyday lives. Buddhas don't fall from the sky.

Also worth noting is that Hui-neng's biography contrasts sharply with that of Shakyamuni Buddha, whose mother died soon after he was born and who grew up in palatial surroundings. Note, too, the occupation: What could be more blameless than selling firewood? Moreover, in Chinese society, the woodcutter and the firewood seller were often viewed as

intermediaries between the mundane and the sacred worlds.

**When he spoke this *Platform Sutra*.** Other editors place this phrase at the end of the previous section, where they understand it to mean “then he spoke this *Platform Sutra*.” But I like it better here, closer to the speaker.

**Good friends.** This was not originally a Chinese phrase but a Chinese translation of the Sanskrit *kalyana-mitra*, which literally means “companions of virtue.” This refers to someone who cultivates and who encourages others to cultivate virtue. As with any spiritual path, relying exclusively on one’s own dedication and energy is seldom sufficient—thus the need for spiritual friends, friends who keep us going when our spirits flag and who point out the way back when we have gone astray.

**Reciting the teaching of the Mahaprajnaparamita.** No lecture is ever delivered at a temple in China without a preliminary ceremony that includes a chant of some kind. The Chinese word *nien* means not only “to recite” but also “to recall” and suggests that everyone present either recited out loud or silently to themselves. It is this ceremony that sanctifies the occasion and that also provides the basis from which this sermon arises. It’s unclear which text was chanted on this occasion. Both the *Heart Sutra* and the *Diamond Sutra* teach the teaching of Mahaprajnaparamita and were the most popular expressions of this teaching. My guess is that what was chanted was not the entire *Heart Sutra* or *Diamond Sutra* but the gatha that ends one or the other. Again, my guess would be that of the *Diamond Sutra*:

“All created things

are like a dream, an illusion, a bubble, a shadow  
like dew or like lightning  
view everything like this.”

In Section 24, Hui-neng refers again to the *Mahaprajnaparamita* and says, “This teaching must be practiced and not simply chanted with your lips. If you chant it with your lips but don’t practice it, it’s like an illusion or a mirage. While the dharma body of those who do practice it is the same as a buddha’s.” In light of this comment, it’s more likely that everyone recited out loud rather than to themselves.

**The Master stopped speaking.** The true teaching is a wordless teaching. Thus, Hui-neng begins this teaching in silence, as if to recall the tradition that began when the Buddha held up a flower, and Kashyapa smiled, and the teaching of Zen began its transmission from mind to mind.

**He purified his own mind.** Apparently a later editor found this passage questionable (thinking, how can you purify what is already pure?) and deleted the whole thing, as it does not appear in the Tsungpao edition. Of course, these are not the words of Hui-neng, but the editor. Still, such an interpretation ignores Hui-neng’s willingness to speak about the mind in both relative and absolute terms as well as his own references to purifying the mind in Sections 33 and 35.

**My kind-hearted father.** It is odd that Hui-neng refers to his father as *tz’u-fu*: “kind-hearted,” especially since he barely knew his father. Usually this epithet is reserved for mothers, and the Tsungpao edition reverts to the more normal *yen-fu*: “strict father.” Hui-neng’s father’s name was Lu Hsing-t’ao. According

to the *Sungkaosengchuan* (8), he was exiled to Lingnan sometime between 618 and 626, and the *Liutsutashih yuanchiwaichi* specifies the ninth month of 620. The reasons for such punishment are unknown, but since these same years marked the beginning of the T'ang dynasty, his crime may have been nothing more than too close an association with the rulers of the previous Sui dynasty. Or perhaps he sided with the wrong faction in the fight to succeed the Sui. During the T'ang, there were three degrees of banishment depending on the severity of the offense: 1,000 kilometers from the capital, 1,250 kilometers, and 1,500 kilometers. Since Hsinchou was 1,500 kilometers from the eastern capital of Loyang and even farther from the western capital of Ch'ang-an, his father's offense must have been serious, though not so serious as to incur the death penalty. Still, banishment to this part of China was often tantamount to a death penalty, as few northerners survived the tropical climate and its diseases.

**Originally from Fanyang.** In this phrase, some texts have *kuan*: “served” instead of *kuan*: “hailed from.” Shen-hui's account, and the inscription that Shen-hui commissioned Wang Wei (701-761) to write, both have “hailed from,” as do the Tunhuang Museum edition, the Huihsin edition, the Chisung edition, and the Tsungpao edition. On the other hand, the Tunhuang Cave edition has “served.” Normally, in an autobiographical sketch one's ancestral home is an essential element, while where one's father served is not.

In either case, Fanyang was the name of an administrative region that included most of northern Hopei province and whose head-quarters was located in what are now the southwest suburbs of Beijing. During the T'ang dynasty, this was also the

base of operations of An Lu-shan, whose rebellion in 755 devastated much of North China. Nowadays, this area is known for the cave at Choukoutien where the remains of Peking Man were found. More significantly for Buddhists, this is also where 15,000 stone tablets containing many of the earliest extant copies of the sutras in the Chinese Buddhist Canon were carved between the eighth and thirteenth centuries. They were found in caves just south of Choukoutien in the 1950s.

**Lingnan.** *Ling-nan* means “south of the ranges.” In this case the ranges are those of the Nanling Mountains, which divide the temperate climate of Hunan province from the semitropical climate of Kuangtung to the south. People who travel through these mountains, nowadays by train or car rather than on horseback or foot, are invariably surprised by the beauty of what is one of China’s most scenic, yet largely ignored, landscapes. During the T’ang, the name referred to all the territory south of these mountains under Chinese control, namely Kuangtung province and parts of Fukien province, Kuangsi province, and Vietnam.

**Hsinchou.** Hui-neng’s hometown was two hundred kilometers southwest of Kuangchou and is now called Hsinhsing. Hui-neng was born there on the eighth day of the second month (also the Buddha’s birthday) in 638 and died there on the third day of the eighth month in 713. Kuo-en Temple, where he died, is twelve kilometers south of town at the foot of Lungshan Mountain, a few minutes’ walk from Lungshan Hotspring.

**My father died.** The *Tsutangchi* and the *Chuantenglü* (5) say his father died when he was three. This would have been in 640.

If so, his father would have spent twenty years in Hsinchou following his banishment there around 620. This would also suggest that Huineng's father remarried or that he added another woman to his household relatively late in life. In the next section, when the Fifth Patriarch and Hui-neng first meet, the patriarch calls Hui-neng a "jungle rat." Hence, my guess is that his mother was a member of one of the ethnic minorities in this region.

**My mother.** His mother's surname was Li. This was also the family name of the imperial family, and it was common for members of ethnic minorities seeking to elevate their status vis-à-vis their Chinese overlords to take this as their family name.

It was not unusual for a prominent family to fall from favor so quickly that the children of the succeeding generation lived impoverished lives. But for the son of an official, even a banished one, to grow up illiterate was, as it would be today, rare. Still, it is an attribute Hui-neng himself insists upon throughout this sutra. After all, his educated father was not alive during his childhood, when he would otherwise have been taught to read and write. And it is possible that literacy was not considered important by his mother, especially if she could not read or write.

**Nanhai.** Nanhai (South Seas) was the old name for Kuangchow/ Guangzhou, or Canton. It was the entrepôt for goods from as far away as India, and it was the biggest port in all of China.

**Textual note:** In place of Hui-neng's opening statement here, the Tsungpao edition has this memorable summary of Hui-neng's teaching: "Your enlightened nature is originally pure. Just use this



mind, and you will at once become a buddha.” The Tsungpao edition then omits the next few lines and resumes with “Good friends, listen to an account of how I obtained the Dharma.”

**Then one day a shopkeeper ordered a load of firewood brought to his store. After he took the delivery and paid me, I walked toward the door and met a customer reciting the *Diamond Sutra* out loud. As soon as I heard the words, my mind felt clear and awake, and I asked the man, ‘Where did you get this scripture you’re reciting?’**

**He said, ‘On Huangmei County’s East Fengmao Mountain in Chichou Prefecture, when I was paying my respects to the Fifth Patriarch, Master Hung-jen. His congregation included more than a thousand disciples. And while I was there, I heard him tell the monks and laypeople that just by memorizing the *Diamond Sutra* they would see their natures and immediately become buddhas.’**

**As soon as I heard this, I felt drawn by something from a past life. I said goodbye to my mother and left for Huangmei’s Fengmao Mountain to pay my respects to the Fifth Patriarch, Master Hung-jen.**

This marks the formal beginning of Hui-neng’s connection with the Dharma. Omitted from this is the unspoken preparation necessary for such understanding. Hui-neng hears and understands because he has been following the path leading to such understanding for a long time, for lifetimes, as we all have. Hui-neng does not let this karmic opportunity slip by and “leaves home” for the sake of the Dharma.

In the *Diamond Sutra* (15), the Buddha says, “Subhuti, this Dharma teaching cannot be heard by beings of lesser aspiration:

not by those who mistakenly perceive a self, nor by those who mistakenly perceive a being, a life, or a soul. For beings who lack the bodhisattva's aspiration cannot hear, grasp, memorize, recite, or master this Dharma teaching." Among early Zen masters, the *Lankavatara* was the sutra most relied on for instruction. But beginning with the Fourth and Fifth Patriarchs, a shift was made from the longer and more difficult text of the *Lanka* to the much shorter and more accessible *Diamond Sutra*.

Also worth noting is the power of words—but spoken words, rather than words on the page. Hearing is more immediate, more direct, than reading. Reading easily leads to the intellectualization of a text, whereas hearing does not usually give us enough time.

**Met a customer.** The *Tsutangchi* (2) identifies this man as An Taoch'eng. However, the same source says An was both the shopkeeper and the man who was reciting the sutra. Although there is no other information about this person, the surname An was often used by merchants as well as monks from the Central Asian kingdom of Sogdia. In ancient times, shopkeepers usually cooked and ate their meals in their shops—hence the need for firewood.

***Diamond Sutra.*** This is the most famous of the several dozen Prajnaparamita /Perfection of Wisdom sutras of Mahayana Buddhism. In the preface to his own commentary on this sutra, Hui-neng says, "Formlessness is its ancestry, non-attachment is its substance, inexplicable existence is its function. Bodhidharma came from the West to transmit the message of this sutra so that people could realize the truth and see their natures. . . . On

hearing this sutra, those who have planted good roots in previous lives will understand at once. While those who have no such karmic wisdom might recite it repeatedly and still not realize the Buddha's meaning." The translation most commonly used in China was made by Kumarajiva around 400. The two concepts advocated in this sutra and emphasized by the early Zen schools in China were those of non-attachment (Sanskrit: *napratishthita*, Chinese: *wu-chu*) and formlessness (Sanskrit: *animitta*, Chinese: *wu-hsiang*).

**East Fengmao Mountain.** The text has *feng-mu*, apparently a copyist error or a variation for which there is no documentary support. Because this mountain was east of Shuangfengshan (Twin Peak Mountain), where the Fourth Patriarch had his center, this became known as Tungshan, or East Mountain. This is why the text calls it East Fengmaoshan. There was no West Fengmaoshan. Note that the word *tung*: "east" does not appear in Hui-neng's reference to the mountain at the end of this section.

The Fifth Patriarch's monastic center was halfway up the mountain's southern slope eighteen kilometers northeast of Huangmei. The main peak is directly north of the temple and has an elevation of 465 meters, while the temple itself is 300 meters above sea level. The coordinates are 115° 54' East and 30° 11' North.

**Chichou.** Nowadays known as Chichun, this was the name of the prefecture that included Huangmei County. Both are located at the southeastern corner of what is now Hupei province on the north bank of the Yangtze River.

**Fifth Patriarch.** The establishment of a male line of succession (I know of no similar line for females) is not unique to Chinese Buddhism, or to Zen. It existed in Indian Buddhism as well. In China, the establishment of a Zen lineage beginning with Bodhidharma does not appear to have been fixed until the time of the Fourth and Fifth Patriarchs. This is probably because there were no Zen monasteries until they were established by these two spiritual heirs of Bodhidharma

**Hung-jen.** A native of the Huangmei area, Hung-jen was born in 601 and became a novice at the age of seven at Tao-hsin's monastery on Shuangfengshan northwest of Huangmei. After Tao-hsin's death in 651, Hung-jen established his own center in 654 on Fengmaoshan. Because Hung-jen's monastery was east of Shuangfengshan, his teaching subsequently became known as East Mountain Zen. He died in 675 and was succeeded as abbot by his disciple Fa-ju. Other disciples went on to found a number of separate schools, and quite a few even lectured at court or enjoyed imperial patronage.

**A thousand disciples.** Some scholars dismiss such figures as hyperbole. However, anyone who makes the effort to visit the sites of these early Zen temples will encounter sufficient evidence attesting to large monastic populations. In 2004, when I visited Yuchuan Temple, near Shen-hsiu's former hermitage, the abbot showed me a Sui-dynasty rice cauldron that held enough rice for over five hundred monks. Also, according to its own records, the number of residents at the Fifth Patriarch Temple reached 1,150 in the seventh century, when Hung-jen was abbot. Such large populations, in fact, were a hallmark of Zen monasteries.

**They would see their natures and immediately become**

**buddhas.** Either this man is simply repeating what he has heard, or he has grasped the essence of Hung-jen's teaching. For more on this, see my commentary to Sections 8 and 16.

**I felt drawn by something in a past life.** Apparently, to counter the criticism often lodged against Buddhist monks and nuns that they failed to fulfill their filial duty of taking care of their parents, the Huihsin, Chisung, and Tsungpao editions add several lines here in which Hui-neng receives enough money from a benefactor so that he can provide for his mother and then go to Huangmei. These later editions also say he reached Huangmei, which was more than a thousand kilometers north of Kuangchou, in little more than a month. The route he would have traveled by foot or horseback would have been north to Shaokuan (200 kilometers), northeast through the Tayu Pass to Kanchou (200 kilometers), and northeast again by boat, down the Kan River to the Yangtze (600 kilometers), and finally across the river to Huangmei. Thus, with the generous support of a benefactor to pay for boat fare, a month or so would have been about right.

The Buddhist conception of karma is quite different from the Western notion of fate. Fate does not give us a choice. It is inexorable. Karma presents us with a set of possibilities from which we are free to choose. Thus, the river of our karma is always changing as we alter its course through our thoughts, words, and deeds.

**Textual note:** This section appears in Chapter One of the Tsungpao edition, where it follows the preceding section. The only significant differences are those noted above whereby Hui-neng is given enough money to arrange for his mother's care and

the amount of time needed to reach Huangmei is specified.

I should note that according to the biography of Hui-neng published in Chapter Five of the *Chuantenglu* ("Transmission of the Lamp") in 1004, Hui-neng did not go directly to Huangmei but first stopped in the Shaokuan area of northern Kuangtung (where he would later return and use as his base) and practiced meditation and studied texts (orally, we can assume) for what must have been at least several years before continuing on to pay his respects to Hung-jen.

**3. Master Hung-jen asked me, 'Where are you from? And what exactly do you hope to get from me by coming to this mountain to pay your respects?'**

I answered, 'Your disciple is from Lingnan, a commoner of Hsinchou. The reason I came all this way to pay my respects is I want to be a buddha. I don't want anything else.'

The Master scoffed, 'But you're from Lingnan and a jungle rat as well. How can you possibly be a buddha?'

I replied, 'People come from the north or south, not their buddha nature. The lives of this jungle rat and the Master's aren't the same, but how can our buddha nature differ?'

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

No wasted words here. Hui-neng knows what he wants. And he also knows something about Buddhism. He may be illiterate

and impoverished, but he knows enough to ask for the crown jewels. And why not? Why practice Buddhism, if not to become a buddha?

It is curious that we have to search so far afield for what we have in our own closet. But this seems to be the rule. Why would we value what we already wear, unless we first exhaust ourselves trying on other people's clothes? Shakyamuni had to spend six years wandering from teacher to teacher and trying practice after practice before he finally realized his own buddha nature.

What is noteworthy here is that instead of undergoing a period of training under Hung-jen's guidance, Hui-neng merely mills rice. The idea is that he has already completed his training in a previous life and needs but one final push, one final straw to break the back of his karmic camel. Book learning at this stage would only be counterproductive. Nor do we see Hui-neng in the meditation hall. Not that meditation isn't important, but instruction at a Zen monastery often reflects this attitude whereby one simply focuses on the work at hand. Chop wood, carry water, and don't ask questions, unless you're ready to answer them yourself. Also noteworthy is that Hui-neng's work in the milling room lasts the length of a pregnancy. He is a bodhisattva waiting to be born.

According to his biography in the *Chuantenglu* (5), Hui-neng arrived at Huangmei in 671, which would make him thirty-four according to Chinese reckoning, which makes us all one year old at birth. He left nine months later, after his enlightenment and receipt of the patriarchship, when he was thirty-five. Curiously, Shakyamuni was also thirty-five when he left Bodh Gaya and began his career as the Buddha. Fa-hai has Hui-neng arriving in 661.

**I want to be a buddha.** Both Tunhuang texts add the word *fa*: “dharma” after *fo*: “buddha.” Clearly, this is a mistake, as it is absent from Hung-jen’s rejoinder as well as from later editions, and I have deleted it.

**Jungle rat.** The Chinese *ke-liao* literally means “dog-hunter,” that is, someone who hunts with dogs. The expression was somewhat more forceful than “hick” or “hillbilly” and indicated membership in one of the hill tribes in South China. Although the Chinese government controlled the towns in the Lingnan region, the majority of the population was still made up of the non-Han Chinese ethnic groups that had been pushed into the forests and mountains by successive migrations of Han Chinese refugees from the north. It’s quite possible that Hui-neng’s mother was a member of one of these ethnic groups and that Hui-neng arrived wearing clothing that suggested such an affiliation. Otherwise, the force of the *yu-shih*: “as well” is hard to explain.

**Buddha nature.** The notion that all beings possess the inherent ability to become buddhas was introduced to the Chinese as early as the third century by such texts as the *Nirvana Sutra*, and by Hui-neng’s day it was common knowledge among Buddhists. In the centuries immediately after the Buddha’s Nirvana, his followers considered buddhahood beyond them and struggled instead for nirvana, or freedom from passion and rebirth. But with the advent of Mahayana Buddhism, the focus of practice shifted to the realization of buddhahood as a function of our inseparable and ineffable unity with all buddhas throughout the ten directions and three periods of time, in a word, with all that is “real.”



**Sangha workforce.** *Sangha* is Sanskrit for “congregation.” In Buddhist monasteries, especially those not located in a city, the residents perform most of the menial work. Some tasks, however, are hired out among local farmers and coolies. Also, monastic duties are not permanent but are rotated among the residents.

**A novice.** This is someone in training to become a monk or nun who has had their head shaved but has not yet received the full precepts.

**I pedaled a millstone.** The monastery grew its own rice and milled it to remove the husks. Some of the milled rice was also ground into flour for use in making steamed bread. Although the monastery’s milling room was recently knocked down and rebuilt, the original millstone is still there. In addition to pedaling a stone wheel, Huineng wore a stone around his waist to increase the force of the milling. The waist stone is also still there.

**Textual note:** This section appears in Chapter One of the Tsung-pao edition, where it follows the preceding section. However, at the end of this section the following exchange appears in the Tsungpao edition but is absent in both Tunhuang copies: “I continued, ‘This disciple’s mind never stops giving rise to wisdom. Without ever leaving my own nature, I find myself in a field of merit. I wonder what work the Master might be referring to?’”

The Patriarch said, ‘This jungle rat is sharp! Don’t say anything more! Go to the stables.’

So I went outside and proceeded to the rear of the

monastery.

After more than eight months, the Patriarch suddenly saw me one day and said, 'I thought your views were worthwhile. But I was worried that someone might become jealous and harm you, so I didn't say anything more. Did you understand?'

I said, 'Yes, I understood. And ever since then I haven't dared go near your hall to keep from attracting attention.'"

**4. One day, the Fifth Patriarch suddenly called all of his disciples together. After they had assembled, he said, 'I've told you that the greatest concern for a human being is life and death. But you disciples spend your days making offerings, just looking for ways to reap merit and not for a way out of the bitter Sea of Sansara. If you're blind to your own nature, how can you find the doorway to merit? Go back to your rooms and look into yourselves. Those of you who are wise, make use of the prajna wisdom of your own nature. Each of you write me a gatha. When I read your gathas, if any of you understands what is truly important, I will give you my robe and my Dharma and appoint you the Sixth Patriarch. Hurry, as if there were a fire!'**

This marks the first request by a Zen master for a graduation gatha, for the expression of a student's understanding in the form of a poem. But since Hung-jen's disciples don't seem surprised by the request and Hung-jen doesn't make a big deal about it, this would suggest the custom goes back much earlier and was already part of the Zen tradition. Although such mind-revealing gathas may have arrived in China along with Bodhidharma,

poetry was already the quintessential form of expression in China. The original meaning of the Chinese word for poetry, *shih*, was “words from the heart.” Hence, Zen masters don’t ask for a dissertation, just a poem.

Every once in a while the thought occurs to us that life and death are truly important. But the moment doesn’t last long, and we usually go back to doing whatever it is we were doing before this realization struck us. But for better or worse, our lives are the poem we show the world. So why should we settle for doggerel? Why not a poem that liberates all beings, and why not one that begins with us?

**Called all of his disciples together.** Hui-neng was not among those summoned because he was not yet considered one of Hung-jen’s disciples, not until the night he left. Although we aren’t told why Hung-jen chose this time to test his disciples’ understanding, perhaps he was feeling his age or had a premonition of his death—he died several years later, in 675.

**Life and death.** Confucius once said, “If you still don’t understand life, how can you understand death?” (*Analects* XI.11) Buddhists, too, focus on life, and not on death, for death is merely the period between one life and the next one. Death, however, puts life into perspective and makes the lesson of impermanence hard to ignore. Faced with our inescapable transience and the transience of all that we know and cherish, we cannot help but be pained by such knowledge. Thus, Buddhists liken our endless round of life and death to a sea of suffering, the only escape from which is the far shore of nirvana. *Sansara* is the Sanskrit term that refers to this cycle of life and death, and *nirvana* to the end of that cycle.

**Making offerings.** Making offerings to the Three Treasures in which Buddhists take refuge—the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha—gives rise to merit. Such offerings include lighting incense, chanting, making prostrations, even meditating.

**Merit.** Merit is another name for good karma: what results from the performance of good deeds. But merit also refers to karma that assists in our spiritual progress. The concept of merit (Sanskrit: *punya*) forms an essential part of the *Diamond Sutra*, where it is presented in ever-expanding hyperbole as the result of vowing to liberate all beings while remaining unattached to the concepts of self, being, or liberation. What results from such merit is the creation and attainment of a buddha's *sanboghakaya*, or body of realization. Thus, merit does not simply refer to procuring a better existence but also to liberation from existence.

Har Dayal says, “All that is noble, beautiful, auspicious, glorious and desirable in the world is the result of *punya*. . . . Even the cyclic evolution and dissolution of the Universe are due to Merit. The sun and the moon owe all their splendour to it. *Punya* is thus a wonderful Power, and it is exalted and glorified in Mahayanist literature to such an extent that it is finally regarded almost as the equivalent of Wisdom (*prajna*) and *bodhi*.” (*The Bodhisattva Doctrine in Sanskrit Literature*, p. 189)

**How can you find the doorway to merit?** In the Tsungpao edition, this becomes: “How can the doorway of merit save you?”

**Go back to your rooms.** Senior monks had their own rooms,

while junior monks usually shared a room, and novices lived in dormitories. The size of a room was usually less than ten feet square, and it included a bed, a footlocker for clothes and books, and a low table for writing. As noted earlier, chairs were uncommon, and people normally sat on straw mats or cushions.

**Prajna.** This is a Sanskrit word meaning “wisdom,” or literally “what comes before knowledge.” The expression “prajna wisdom” seems redundant, but it lets people know that what is being referred to is not the wisdom of the mundane world but the wisdom that exists before we conjure the mundane world into existence.

**Your own nature.** The Chinese character *hsing*: “nature” is a combination of the characters *sheng*: “birth” and *hsin*: “mind.” As Huineng and Hung-jen use these terms, “nature” and “mind” become the “waves” and “particles” of dharmic physics, the “dynamic” and “static” views of reality. Our nature gives birth to our mind, and our mind constitutes our nature, which gives birth to our mind, which constitutes our nature, and so on, like some infinite, kaleidoscopic fractal. While philosophers might wonder which came first, our nature or our mind, Hung-jen asks us to see our nature and know our mind and to use the wisdom that arises from such realization to write a poem.

**Gatha.** In Indian verse this was a metrical unit of indeterminate length, but in China this term was usually applied to a four-line poem that expressed one’s spiritual realization. Although this poetic form appeared in China much earlier, it wasn’t until the seventh century that it became sufficiently popular with Zen masters that they began requiring “graduation gathas” from their

disciples as authentication of their understanding. Thus, Hung-jen asks for a poem.

**What is truly important.** For a follower of the Mahayana path, nothing is more important than enlightenment. Unless we realize the nature of reality, we remain imprisoned by our delusions and unable to help others do the same. But the nature of reality is simply our own nature.

**My robe and my Dharma.** It is unclear when this custom began whereby a Buddhist master gave his robe (and often his bowl as well) to one of his disciples as a symbol of authority to teach in the master's place. The *Chuantenglu* (3) traces it back to Mahakashyapa, the disciple of the Buddha who became the First Zen Patriarch of India. Hui-neng supposedly tried to put an end to the custom, but different sources assign the transmission of his robe to various disciples after his death. More important than the robe itself, however, was the authority to transmit the master's true teaching, which is what is meant here by the word "Dharma."

**Sixth Patriarch.** The word *tsu*: "patriarch" is missing in both Tunhuang copies but present elsewhere in the same editions wherever the term *liu-tai*: "sixth-generation" occurs. Hence, I have added it here.

**As if there were a fire.** This was a common expression urging haste. But used by a Buddhist, it also refers to the story in the *Lotus Sutra* (3), where the Buddha likens our existence to living in a burning house and his teachings to enticements designed to lure us out of our self-imposed hell.

**Textual note:** This section appears in Chapter One of the Tsungpao edition, where it follows the preceding section. However, the following lines have been added to the end of this section in the Tsungpao edition: “Don’t procrastinate. If you stop to think about it, you’ll go right past it. Those who see their nature, see it in a flash. Even when they’re being threatened with a sword or during a battle, they still see it.”

**5. Having received these instructions, his disciples headed back to their rooms and said to one another; ‘There’s no need for us to clear our minds and trouble ourselves about writing a gatha to show the abbot. The venerable Shenhsiu is our precept instructor. After he receives the Dharma, we can look to him. Why should we write a gatha?’ So they all stopped worrying about it, and no one dared to submit a poem.**

**At that time, in front of the Patriarch’s Hall, there was a three-section-long corridor. Because people left offerings at the foot of the wall, the abbot wanted to cover it with scenes from the *Lankavatara Sutra* and paintings of the five patriarchs transmitting the robe and the Dharma as a record to be passed down to future generations. The painter Lu Chen had inspected the wall and was going to begin work the following day.**

I realize this has been dramatized, but what are these people doing in a Zen monastery? The one lesson anyone learns in a Zen monastery is that we have to rely on ourselves if we expect to find out anything about ourselves. Nobody can live for us or die for us. And nobody can realize enlightenment for us. We

have to drink the water if we want to know what it tastes like. But just because Hung-jen can lead people to water doesn't mean he can make them drink. Perhaps he thinks that a painting of water will do the trick.

**Shen-hsiu.** He was born in 605 and grew up in North China in the city of Kaifeng in a family related to that of the emperor. He became a monk at the age of twenty and was known for his learning. After hearing about Hung-jen, he traveled to Huangmei in 655 and was so impressed he decided to stay. Accounts differ as to when he left. Some say he left in tears in 662 and went into hiding for over ten years—others say it was in 672 or even 675, following Hung-jen's death. It all depends on which account one accepts for Hui-neng's arrival and departure. In any case, he built a hermitage outside Tangyang near Yuchuan Temple around 676. After a number of years, his fame reached Empress Wu Ts'e-t'ien, who invited him to court. And he spent the rest of his life in the capitals of Ch'ang-an and Loyang lecturing to audiences that sometimes numbered in the thousands. Shortly after turning one hundred, he died in Loyang in 706. His remains were returned to Tangyang and interred in a stupa near his former hermitage. The stupa was torn down by the Red Guards in 1967, but it is presently not known if Shen-hsiu's remains were removed from the underground burial chamber.

**Precept instructor.** This was the name for the monk or nun in charge of instructing novices in the precepts and the texts that dealt with deportment. Thus, anyone who becomes a monk or nun necessarily has a close relationship with this person.

**Receives the Dharma.** This expression refers to the custom of



appointing an heir. Such a person has the authority to teach the teaching which the master received from their master. This custom was of paramount importance in Zen, as opposed to Pure Land Buddhism, because the teaching was wordless and could not be transmitted to someone simply because they were learned or zealous in their practice.

**Patriarch's Hall.** Zen temples in China include a separate shrine hall, usually at the very back of the temple, devoted to the veneration of the teacher(s) through whom the abbot or abbess traces their spiritual ancestry. The abbot's or abbess's bedroom and reception room are also inside or adjacent to this hall, and access is restricted.

**Three-section-long.** The dimensions of buildings in ancient China were measured according to the number of spans between the pillars needed to support the roof. Thus, a three-section wall actually included four pillars, two at either end and two in between. The distance between pillars varied, but ten feet was about average. Thus, this wall would have been around thirty feet long.

**Left offerings.** The reason pilgrims left offerings before this wall was that they were not allowed inside the compound in which the abbot lived, but they still wanted to pay their respects and also earn merit.

**Lankavatara Sutra.** This was the text used by Bodhidharma and the early Zen patriarchs for instructing their disciples. In addition to several Sanskrit copies and a Tibetan translation, there are three extant Chinese translations: one by Gunabhadra in 443, one by Bodhiruchi in 513, and one by Shikshanada in

704. The Gunabhadra version was the one favored by Zen practitioners. This sutra is an early work of the Yogacara school of Indian Buddhism and presents that school's doctrine that everything is mind and made of and by the mind. The scenes to be depicted would have included the Buddha rising out of the sea and delivering a sermon on Mount Lanka to the King of the Rakshasas and also his subsequent instructions to Mahamati concerning the Mind Only doctrine. The only complete English translation was published by D. T. Suzuki in 1934. My own languishes in a drawer, waiting for one really long winter, if not a couple of rainy summers as well.

**The five patriarchs transmitting the robe and the Dharma.** Hung-jen is the Fifth Patriarch. Hence, this series of paintings was meant to end with him receiving the Dharma from Tao-hsin, the Fourth Patriarch.

In Shen-hui's *Discourse on the Determination of Right and Wrong in Bodhidharma's Southern School* (a long-lost text found in the Tunhuang Caves) Master Yuan asked, "Did they transmit the robe in India?" And Shen-hui replied, "No, they did not transmit the robe in India." Master Yuan then asked, "And why didn't they transmit the robe?" Shen-hui said, "In India there were many accomplished people whose minds were not arrogant or deceitful, so masters only transmitted the understanding of the mind. In China, there are so many fools looking for fame and fortune, it's hard to tell those who are right from those who are wrong. So we transmit the robe as a sign of our school's authority."

**Lu Chen.** In later editions, he is said to be a court artist. If so, I have been unable to find any reference to him in the records available to me.

**Textual note:** This section appears in Chapter One of the Tsungpao edition, where it follows the preceding section. However, the Tsung-pao edition moves the second paragraph of this section to the end of the first paragraph of the following section.

6. The venerable Shen-hsiu thought, ‘No one is going to submit a mind-poem, because I’m their precept instructor. But if I don’t submit one, how can the Patriarch tell if the understanding of my mind is deep or not? It would be right for me to show the Patriarch a poem that reveals my understanding, as long as what I wanted was the Dharma. But it would be wrong, as long as what I wanted was the patriarchship. I would be no better than a fool who thinks he can usurp the position of a sage. But if I don’t submit a mind-poem, I’ll never receive the Dharma.’ As he considered this, he kept thinking, ‘What a predicament!’

Finally at midnight, without letting anyone know, he went to write his poem on the middle of the south corridor wall in hopes of obtaining the robe and the Dharma. ‘When the Patriarch sees my gatha and reads these words,’ he thought, ‘if he comes to find me, the moment I see him, I will tell him I wrote it. But when he sees my gatha, if he says it’s not good enough, it will be because I’m deluded and the obstruction of my past karma is too great, and I’m not ready to receive the Dharma. The Master’s mind is impossible to fathom. I may as well stop worrying about it.’ So the venerable Shen-hsiu held up a lantern and wrote his gatha on the middle of the south

corridor wall at midnight, and no one saw him. His gatha went:

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

How do we write a poem about our mind when it’s our mind that writes the poem? Cold Mountain wrote: “My mind is like the autumn moon / clear and bright in a pool of jade / nothing can compare / what more can I say?”

Shen-hsiu was a highly educated monk and should have been able to write a decent poem, especially considering what was at stake. Instead, he ends up writing a piece of doggerel that would have been more at home among Hinayana ascetics than Mahayana practitioners. Then again, in this dramatized version of events, Shen-hsiu does a good job playing the straight man and setting the stage for Hui-neng.

**Mind-poem.** Poetry has always been the preeminent form of expression among the Chinese, and yet Zen is the only religious sect in China that has demanded poetry from its students and expected it from its masters, as students use it to express their understanding and masters use it to teach four-line sermons.

**As long as what I wanted was the Dharma.** The Tunhuang Museum copy mistakenly links this phrase to the following sentence. Hence, in this case, I’ve followed the Tunhuang Cave copy.

**Receive the Dharma.** The term *Dharma* is being used in an odd way peculiar to Zen. Here it means authentication or

approval of one's understanding. Essentially, to "receive the Dharma" is equivalent to receiving one's PhD and thus the acknowledgment that one is fit to teach others.

**South corridor:** The shrine halls at the Fifth Patriarch Temple were all oriented facing south. Thus, this would have been the wall people first approached and through which they had to pass in order to enter the Patriarch's Hall and the abbot's residence.

**Reads these words.** I suspect the text is corrupt here. It's certainly weak. Instead of *yen-tz'u-chieh-yu*: "reads these gatha-words," I would expect something more positive. The Tsungpao edition has *tao-hao*: "approves."

**The moment I see him, I will tell him I wrote it. But when he sees my gatha, if he says it's not good enough, it will be because I'm deluded.** These lines are absent in the Tunhuang Cave copy, but they are meant to enforce the idea that Shen-hsiu is still not ready to receive the patriarchship. After all, he should know if he's still deluded or not.

**Past karma.** In a universe conceived as made of matter, we acknowledge the operation of the law of cause and effect. Likewise, in a universe conceived as made of mind, Buddhists acknowledge the law of karma, whereby our every thought, word, and deed has repercussions that we experience (or at least our illusory self experiences) for as many as seven lifetimes.

**Bodhi tree.** Shakyamuni was enlightened while sitting at the foot of a pippala tree. Ever since then, this variety of Indian fig has been known as the "bodhi tree." Here, however, it becomes a metaphor for our body, in whose shade we cultivate the

teachings of the Buddha.

**Standing mirror.** Until fairly recent times, mirrors in China were made of bronze. Most were small enough to hold in the hand, and they were kept enclosed when not in use. This particular mirror, however, is large enough to be held upright by means of a stand or frame of some kind and kept on permanent display. In his poem, Shen-hsiu uses the phrase *ming-ching*: “bright/polished mirror.” Apparently, he is contrasting this with Lao-tzu’s *hsuan-ching*: “dark mirror.” In his *Taoteching* (10), Lao-tzu wrote, “Can you keep your dark mirror free of dust?” Shen-hsiu was forced to add the word *t’ai*: “stand/upright” to his mirror in order to establish a rhyme for the final line’s *ch’en-ai*: “dust.” Again, this is a clumsy conception and a disappointing poem.

Chuang-tzu once wrote, “The realized person uses their mind like a mirror, neither anticipating nor welcoming anything, responding to everything and retaining nothing. Such a person is thus able to succeed in all things and remain unharmed.” (*Chuangtzu*: 7)

According to the terminology of the Yogacara school, from which Zen masters borrowed a number of conceptual tools and terms, the enlightenment of a buddha is called “complete and perfect mirror wisdom.”

**Dust.** This is a standard Buddhist metaphor for sensation and for affliction arising from our attachment to sensation. Such dust clouds our vision and prevents us from seeing the true nature of reality. However, this conception, where sensation is seen as something to get rid of and as something separate from our unblemished mind, is a conception of Hinayana, not Mahayana, Buddhism. As the *Heart Sutra* tells us, “Form is not separate

from emptiness, and emptiness is not separate from form.”

**Textual note:** This section appears in Chapter One of the Tsungpao edition, where it follows the preceding section. However, for the second paragraph of this section, the Tsungpao edition has this instead: “After Shen-hsiu composed his gatha, he went to present it several times. But each time, as he approached the Patriarch’s Hall, his heart would begin to pound, and his whole body would become covered with sweat, and he would stop short. In the course of four days, he tried thirteen times, all without success. Finally, Shen-hsiu thought, ‘It would be better if I just wrote it along the corridor for the abbot to see. If he approves, I’ll come forward and tell him I wrote it. And if he finds it unworthy, then I will have wasted all these years in the mountains honored by others while not even knowing what path I’m following.’” The Tsungpao edition then concludes with the same final sentence and poem.

**7. After Shen-hsiu wrote this gatha, he returned to his room unseen and lay down. At dawn, the Fifth Patriarch sent for the court artist, Lu Chen, to come to the south corridor to paint scenes from the *Lankavatara*. The Fifth Patriarch suddenly saw this gatha. After he read it, he told Lu, ‘You’ve gone to so much trouble and come so far, we will pay you thirty thousand cash, but we won’t need any images now. The *Diamond Sutra* says, “All images are illusions.” It would be better if we kept this gatha for deluded people to recite. If they rely on it for their practice, they won’t fall into 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 gatha. When everyone saw this, they were filled with admiration. 'Unless you all recite and understand this gatha,' he said, 'you won't see your nature. Anyone who relies on this for their practice won't regress.' As his disciples recited it, they all did so with respect and exclaimed how wonderful it was.

Skillful means is the final accomplishment of a bodhisattva. Not everyone is ready for Zen. Thus, Hung-jen does not dismiss this poem as useless. Wisdom depends on compassion, just as compassion depends on wisdom. There were more than a thousand monks at this monastery, and clearly not all of them were capable of understanding the Dharma transmitted by Bodhidharma.

The T'ang-dynasty poet-official, Pai Chu-yi, once asked a Buddhist monk the most profound teaching of his religion. The monk answered in a verse paraphrased from the *Dhammapada*: "Commit no wrongs / perform good deeds / and let your thoughts be pure / thus do all buddhas teach." However, the teaching expressed by Shen-hsiu's poem is not the teaching that sets us free, but the teaching that itself becomes a burden and ensures our further rebirth in the Sea of Suffering.

**At dawn.** The monastic day begins one or two hours before dawn with a ceremony that involves chanting and sometimes meditation, followed by breakfast, after which residents begin their daily tasks. The court artist would have spent the night in quarters set aside for lay visitors and would have expected to begin work after the morning meal.



**After he read it.** I've followed Guo Peng here in amending *ch'ing-chi*: "he asked to record it," which is present in both Tunhuang copies, to *tu-ch'i*: "after he read it."

**Thirty thousand cash.** At the beginning of the T'ang dynasty, round copper coins were introduced that remained in use until the end of the Ch'ing dynasty in the early twentieth century. These coins had a square hole in the middle and were strung together into larger denominations for ease in handling. Each coin was one-tenth of an ounce. Hence, 30,000 coins would have weighed 3,000 ounces or nearly 200 pounds. When payments reached this level, they were usually converted into their equivalent value in bolts of silk, which was how taxes were also normally paid. Regarding this payment, the Huihsin edition has "ten thousand," while the Chisung and Tsungpao editions don't mention the amount. The size of the payment apparently reflects the inflationary crisis of the 670s.

**All images are illusions.** This line is from Chapter Five of the *Diamond Sutra*, where the Buddha asks his disciple Subhuti if he sees the Buddha's body and then proceeds to tell him, "All images are illusions." The Sanskrit here is *lakshana-sampat tavan mirsha*: "The possession of attributes is an illusion." However, the Chinese translation of Kumarajiva, on which Hung-jen relied for his understanding of this line, renders this: *fan-suo-yu-hsiang chieh-shih hsu-wang*: "All images are illusions." They are illusions because we invest them with self-existence, we separate them from the indivisible fabric of reality. Thus, we put horns on a rabbit and fur on a tortoise. But after this line, the Buddha adds (in Kumarajiva's Chinese translation), "To see all images as no image is to see the Buddha."

**Three unfortunate states of existence.** Buddhists liken the varieties of existence to a wheel with six spokes, and thus six sections through which we pass from one life to the next. The three fortunate states of existence include celestial beings (*devas*), malevolent beings (*asuras*), and human beings (*manus*). The three unfortunate states include sinners in one of the hells (*narakas*), hungry ghosts (*pretas*), and plants and animals (*tiryagyoni*). Their existence is the result of the Three Poisons: delusion (sinners), greed (hungry ghosts), and anger (plants and animals). The reason these are called “unfortunate states of existence” is because there is no access to the Dharma in such a state.

**Burned incense.** With the arrival and spread of Buddhism in China, incense became one of China’s major imports. Among the fragrances preferred during the T’ang dynasty were frankincense, myrrh, styrax, bdellium, costus, aloewood, and, of course, sandalwood. In addition to its calming influence, incense was burned to call down celestial spirits for protection and also to confer an air of sanctity on ceremonies.

**Unless you all recite and understand this gatha.** Both Tunhuang copies omit *wu*: “understand,” which appears in later editions. I have gone along with Suzuki, who inserted it in his Tunhuang Cave edition, as merely reciting this gatha does not result in realization of our buddha nature. Also, in Section 8, the novice who repeats Hung-jen’s praise of this gatha says, “Those who recite *and understand* this gatha will see their nature and achieve liberation.” Hungjen’s inclusion of the word “understand” is a polite way of saying that the true usefulness of

this gatha depends on the understanding of the person who recites it.

**Later, the Fifth Patriarch called Shen-hsiu to his room and asked, ‘Did you write the gatha? If you did, you’re ready to receive my Dharma.’**

**Shen-hsiu 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 consideration as to whether your disciple has acquired enough wisdom to understand what is truly important or not.’**

**The Fifth Patriarch said, ‘This gatha of yours shows your understanding has only reached the threshold and has not yet entered inside. If ordinary people use your gatha in their practice, they won’t regress. But someone with such an understanding who seeks perfect enlightenment will never realize it. 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 gatha. If you’re able to enter the door and see your nature, I will give you the robe and the Dharma.’ Shen-hsiu left, but after several days he still hadn’t written anything.**

Some teachers only teach one teaching. Whenever anyone asked Chu-chih a question, all he ever did was hold up one finger. That was the extent of his One Finger Zen. But some teachers have a broader repertoire and adapt their teaching to their audience, as Hung-jen does. Thus, he understands that for some of us, treading water is about all we can expect. Still, the Fifth Patriarch was also looking for a successor, someone who could reach the other shore. And the only way to reach the

other shore is to walk on water.

**You're ready to receive my Dharma.** Given Hung-jen's subsequent statement in this section that Shen-hsiu's understanding was still imperfect, some editors have wondered if this line is not an interpolation and have suggested deleting it. However, there is no reason not to read this as Hung-jen's judgment that Shen-hsiu had reached the threshold, but only the threshold. He is ready for the teaching. But whether he can understand it is another matter.

**Will never realize it.** After this phrase, the Tsungpao edition adds this: "For perfect enlightenment, you must recognize your own mind in an instant and see your own nature as neither born nor destroyed and see it at all times and with every thought and as not attached to anything and as real whether it is one or many and as real under all conditions. The mind that is real is truly real. If you see it like this, this is your original nature of perfect enlightenment."

**See your nature.** This is the only teaching transmitted in Zen. The rest is merely window dressing. Our nature includes every thought, every feeling, every memory, every atom of our bodies, and every dharma of our minds, all of which are empty of self-existence. To see their emptiness is to see our nature. The only difference between buddhas and deluded beings is this: Buddhas see the emptiness of their nature, and deluded beings see the walls of their delusions. In the *Heart Sutra*, Avalokiteshvara says, "All dharmas are defined by emptiness, not birth or destruction, purity or defilement, completeness or deficiency." Emptiness is our nature, and our nature is emptiness. The Chinese character used here is *chien*, which not only means "to

see” but also “to experience.” Thus, to see our nature is to experience our nature, to experience its emptiness.

**Textual note:** This section appears in Chapter One of the Tsungpao edition, where it follows the preceding section.

**8. A novice walked past the milling room chanting this gatha. As soon as I heard it, I knew it was by someone who hadn’t seen his nature or understood what was truly important. I asked the boy, ‘What gatha 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 his Dharma. So he told his disciples to write a gatha and show it to him, and he’ll give his robe and Dharma to whoever understands what is truly important, and that person will become the Sixth Patriarch. One of the senior monks, Shen-hsiu, wrote this “Formless Gatha” along the south corridor. And the Patriarch told all of his disciples to recite it and whoever understands this gatha will see their nature and whoever uses it for their practice will achieve liberation.’

I replied, ‘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 that I can see this gatha and pay my respects? I hope that, by reciting it, I’ll establish a karmic connection and be reborn in a buddhaland.’

Hui-neng feels something stir within and asks to be led before a

poem he knows is a superficial expression of spiritual practice. And he does this in order to give birth to his own understanding. Thus does delusion give rise to wisdom and affliction give birth to enlightenment and Shen-hsiu's poem become the doorway to Hui-neng's buddhaland.

Once again, we encounter the power of words, not words on a page, but spoken words. First Hui-neng hears the *Diamond Sutra*, and now he hears Shen-hsiu's "Formless Gatha." Rare is the account of a Zen master enlightened while reading a book. Oral understanding is far more direct, far more basic, than visual understanding. Beings in this world's primal sea developed ears long before they developed eyes. And written language hasn't been around for more than a few thousand years, while spoken language goes back hundreds of thousands of years, if not further. Civilization may be based on the visual comprehension of symbols, but the liberation of the mind is often hampered, even doomed, by dependence on such media. This book, too, hardly compares to hearing a teaching directly. And listening to words hardly compares to hearing the wind in the pines.

**A novice walked past.** The Tsungpao edition noted in its version of the previous section that Hung-jen told Shen-hsiu to think this over for one or two days. Hence, here that edition says this event happened two days later.

**Understood what was truly important.** The Chinese is *shih-ta-yi*: "understand the great meaning." This is an all-purpose expression. Sometimes it means to understand the gist of something, the general meaning. Here it means to understand the ultimate meaning, the real meaning, as opposed to the superficial meaning. In his poem about the ideal society, Lao-tzu wrote,

“Imagine a small state with a small population / let there be labor-saving tools / that aren’t used / let people consider death / and not move far . . .” (*Taoteching*: 80) This is what Hung-jen means when he asks us to understand what is truly important. Let people consider life and death and write a poem rooted in both that transcends both.

**Formless Gatha.** Hui-neng uses the same title for a number of his own gathas near the end of this sutra. Hung-jen used this term earlier in referring to the passage on formlessness in Chapter Five of the *Diamond Sutra* when he dismissed the painter Lu Chen. The expression *wu-hsiang*: “formlessness” was also a favorite of Hui-k’o, the Second Patriarch. And it was the name of the temple built in his honor on Ssukungshan in Anhui province, where he sought refuge in 552, and where Seng-ts’an, the monk who became the Third Patriarch, later returned. But Shen-hsiu’s understanding of formlessness, at least as expressed in the gatha attributed to him here, is not the formlessness expressed by the Buddha in the *Diamond Sutra* but the formlessness of Subhuti, who still sees emptiness as nothingness. Thus, the Buddha tells Subhuti, “Since all images are illusions, and no images are not illusions, by means of images that are not images the Tathagata can, indeed, be seen.” (5) Form is emptiness, and emptiness is form.

**Achieve liberation.** Liberation from the wheel of life and death. Actually, this novice has overstated Hung-jen’s claims regarding this gatha. Hung-jen only says that Shen-hsiu’s gatha can prevent rebirth into a lesser state of existence where one would be cut off from the Dharma. Apparently the editor of the Tsungpao edition noticed this discrepancy and corrected it by

having the novice quote Hungjen's earlier praise of this gatha. It is interesting that even a novice talks about seeing his nature and equates it with liberation. But the irony here is that someone actually uses this gatha to achieve liberation, though as a view to be transcended. And perhaps this was why Hung-jen says in Section 7 that whoever understands this gatha will see their nature.

**Karmic connection.** Every thought, word, or deed bears its fruit, in this life or the next, or the next. Thus, the cultivation of certain practices creates karma beneficial to our future spiritual welfare. Although this is what Hui-neng is referring to, he was also speaking in terms this novice would understand so he would lead him to the Patriarch's Hall.

**Buddhaland.** There are an infinite number of realms of existence. And in each realm there is a buddha who teaches the Dharma. However, a buddha is not always present. To be reborn in a place and a time when a buddha teaches is to be reborn in a buddhaland.

The novice then led me to the south corridor, where I bowed before the gatha. Because I was illiterate, I asked someone to read it. Once I heard it, I understood what was truly important, and I also composed a gatha. I asked someone who could write to write it on the west corridor wall so that I could reveal my mind. Unless you know your own mind, studying the Dharma is useless. But once you know your mind and see your nature, you understand what is truly important. My gatha went:

**'Bodhi doesn't have any trees**



**this mirror doesn't have a stand  
our buddha nature is forever pure  
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 clean  
dust has no place to land.'**

**When the disciples in the courtyard saw these gathas of mine, they were all dumbfounded. After I left and went back to the milling room, the Fifth Patriarch suddenly came down the corridor and also saw them. He knew I understood what was truly important, but he didn't want others to know. So he told everyone, 'This one doesn't get it either.'**

The only truth worth knowing is the truth of our own mind. But there is our mind, and then there is the mind we have been trained to believe is our mind. The one gives birth to wisdom, the other to delusion. Shen-hsiu offers a poem rooted in the dialectics of delusion, while Huineng responds with a poem born from the emptiness of wisdom.

**I asked someone to read it.** This is a bit odd. Hui-neng has already heard this gatha. Why does he now ask to have it read to him? Apparently, he needs to have it read out loud in order to set the stage for his own response.

The Huihsin, Chisung, and Tsungpao editions have: "I asked an educated man to read it, for I hoped that by hearing it I

would be reborn in a buddha assembly. A man named Chang Jih-yung, who was an aide to the governor in Chiangchou (ed. Chiuchiang—across the Yangtze from Huangmei) then read it in a loud voice.

After I heard it, I said, ‘I also have a gatha, which I hope the administrative aide will write for me.’

The aide said, ‘You also have a gatha? Now that’s really amazing.’

I responded, ‘Someone who wants to cultivate perfect enlightenment should not belittle someone who is just beginning. The lowest of the low might possess the highest wisdom. And the highest of the high might be in want of wisdom. When you belittle people, you incur boundless retribution.’

The governor’s aide said, ‘Just recite your gatha, and I’ll write it for you. But if you obtain the Dharma, you have to liberate me first. Don’t forget.’”

Apparently, Hui-neng forgot, as there is no further mention of this person in any other record. Or perhaps Hui-neng’s sudden and unexpected departure made such recompense impossible.

**Once I heard it.** This is the second significant event in Hui-neng’s spiritual progress. The first occurred when he was delivering firewood in Nanhai. Thus, we are presented with the view that Hui-neng needed only to hear a line from the *Diamond Sutra* or a poem—even one that tried but failed to reveal the buddha mind—in order to advance his own understanding. Clearly, he is presented here as a bodhisattva near the end of the path.

**West corridor.** According to the Chinese conception of things, the east side is for the host, and the west side is for the guest.

Since Huineng is a guest, he writes his gatha on the less conspicuous side, away from the rising sun. Shen-hsiu wrote his gatha on the south side simply because this was the side on which the murals were to be painted and also the side where the entrance to the Patriarch's Hall was located.

**Reveal my mind.** In Zen, students show their level of understanding through words and deeds. But the sort of understanding they cultivate and reveal is not the understanding of a logical argument based on the conceptual swamp of human culture. It is the understanding of One Finger Zen or No Mind Zen or Have a Cup of Tea Zen.

**See your nature.** When someone asked Huang-po what this line meant, he said, "Your nature is seeing. Seeing is your nature. You can't use your nature to see another nature. And hearing is your nature. You can't use your nature to hear another nature." (*Chuanhsin-fayao* II.38, cf. *The Zen Teaching of Huang-po*, translated by John Blofeld, p. 116)

**Then I composed another one.** Both Tunhuang versions, as well as the Hsihsia translation, include two gathas here. However, the Huihsin, Chisung, and Tsungpao editions have only the first one, and they amend its third line to *pen-lai wu yi-wu*: "actually there isn't a thing." Commentators have wondered which version was Huineng's original poem. I think maybe both. Poets are always making changes to their poems. As for "actually there isn't a thing," this line also appears in a poem written around 780 by Cold Mountain's friend, Feng Kan. And Huang-po quotes Feng Kan's poem in his *Wanlingchi*. (See *The Zen Teaching of Huang Po* translated by John Blofeld, p.

78.) While the version here, “our buddha nature is forever pure,” is not as catchy, this concept runs throughout this text, while the concept behind “actually there isn’t a thing,” if it can be called a concept, is less obvious.

**This one doesn’t get it either.** In Section 7, Hung-jen tells his disciples that Shen-hsiu’s gatha is worthwhile. Only in private does he tell Shen-hsiu that he didn’t “get it.” Thus, from the perspective of continuity the expression *yi*: “either” is an editorial mistake. The Tsung-pao edition has Hung-jen taking off his shoe and erasing Hui-neng’s gatha and then saying, “This one doesn’t see his nature either.”

**Textual note:** This section appears in Chapter One of the Tsungpao edition, where it follows the preceding section.

**9. 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, as he transmitted the robe and the direct teaching to me, and I became the Sixth Patriarch. The robe is an embodiment of trust that has been handed down from one generation to the next. But the Dharma is transmitted from mind to mind and must be realized by people themselves.**

Then the Fifth Patriarch said, ‘Hui-neng, since ancient times 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 must leave at once.’

The first part of this sutra turns around this event: on the one hand, the transmission of the robe, the symbol of authority to teach this teaching, and on the other hand, the transmission of the teaching itself, the Dharma of Zen, the direct teaching of mind to mind, which is only possible when no mind stands in the way. Again, Hui-neng is presented as a buddha-in-waiting, waiting only to receive the authority to teach the teaching he already understands but does not yet have words for.

This event is sanctified, if not empowered, by the teaching of the *Diamond Sutra*, which tells us that if we want to realize enlightenment, we must devote our lives to liberating all beings without being attached to such concepts as “being,” “liberation,” or “self”: no recipient, no gift, and no one who gives. But even if we do practice this teaching, people do not necessarily sing out in gladness but are just as likely to call us mad, if not dangerous. Thus, at the end of their sermons, Zen masters often tell their audience to *pao-chung* or *chen-chung*: “take care.” In this case, Hui-neng is advised not just to take care, but to run for his life.

**At the beginning of the third watch.** The third watch began at eleven P.M. and lasted until one A.M. At the end of the previous section and leading into this section, the Tsungpao edition adds this: “And so everyone thought that was the case (ed. that Hui-neng’s gatha wasn’t good enough). The following day, the Patriarch went unobserved to the milling room and saw me wearing my waist-stone milling rice. He said, ‘Someone who seeks the Way forgets about their body for the sake of the teaching. This would seem to be true of you. But tell me, is the rice ready or not?’

I answered, ‘The rice has been ready for a long time. It just

needs to be winnowed.'

The Patriarch then struck his staff on the ground three times and left. I understood the Patriarch's meaning, and when the bell was struck three times (ed. at the beginning of the third watch), I entered his room."

**Called me into his room.** After this phrase, the Huihsin, Chisung, and Tsungpao editions add: "He made a curtain of his robe so that no one would see, and he read the *Diamond Sutra* to me. When he reached 'you should give rise to a thought (ed. this appears in Chapter Four of Kumarajiva's Chinese translation) without being attached to anything,' I suddenly realized that nothing in this world is separate from our own nature. And I said, 'Master, How could I have guessed that my own nature was already pure? How could I have guessed that my own nature was already beyond birth and death? How could I have guessed that my own nature was already complete? How could I have guessed that my own nature was already unshakeable? And how could I have guessed that my own nature could give birth to all things?' The Patriarch knew I had realized my own nature and said to me, 'Unless people know their own mind, studying the Dharma is useless. But once someone knows their own mind and sees their own nature, that person is called a master, a teacher of humans and devas, a buddha.'"

A number of commentators have noted that this is an odd interpolation, as Hui-neng's ecstatic praise has nothing to do with the *Diamond Sutra*, but rather with the *Lankavatara*. But the connections one makes in understanding the Dharma are hard to fathom. And reading a passage in one sutra can sometimes result in understanding another passage dealing with a

different teaching in another sutra. In any case, Hui-neng must have already understood this teaching. Otherwise, how could he have written his gatha(s)?

***Diamond Sutra.*** This is the most popular of the sixteen Prajnaparamita sutras that make up the *Mahaprajnaparamita Sutra*. Praj na, or wisdom, is the sixth of the paramitas, or perfections, that lead to the other shore. Here we see the beginning of the transition from the headier, more complex teaching of the *Lankavatara* to the more devotional and, at the same time, radical teaching of the *Diamond*, from the *alaya-vijnana*, or storehouse consciousness, to *prajna*.

**Received the Dharma.** Again, the term *Dharma* is being used as equivalent to “teaching,” or “sanction to teach the teacher’s teaching.”

**Direct teaching.** This became a hallmark of what developed into the Southern School of Zen and is contrasted with the “indirect” teaching of successive stages attributed to the Northern School. Aside from the contentiousness of such an ascription, the main function of calling this a *tun-chiao*: “direct teaching” was to remind students that the separation in time between one thought and the next was just another delusion and that the existence of a period of time between delusion and enlightenment was, likewise, a delusion. This teaching follows from the concept of buddha nature. If we all have the buddha nature, then we are already basically buddhas. While insights come and go, some deeper than others, enlightenment isn’t partial or transient. It’s all or nothing. Hence, this teaching is called “direct.”

**The robe is an embodiment of trust that has been handed down from one generation to the next.** In this line, I have amended the Tunhuang edition's *hsin-ping*: “authority of trust,” which is rather odd and occurs nowhere else in the literature, and replaced it with the more common *hsin-t'i*: “embodiment of trust,” which is the reading in the Tsungpao edition. After this line, the Chisung and Tsungpao editions add: “the robe is a point of contention, and with you its transmission must end.” Later, in Section 49, Hui-neng, indeed, tells his disciples that the transmission of the robe will end with him. However, reports of its continued transmission appear long after Hui-neng's death.

**Since ancient times.** The transmission of Zen began when the Buddha held up a flower and Mahakashyapa, the eldest of the three Kashyapa brothers, smiled. That was around 400 B.C. At the end of this sutra, in Sections 49 and 51, we are given a list of all the patriarchs in a lineage that was already ancient in Hui-neng's day and that included the buddhas prior to Shakyamuni.

**Textual note:** This section appears in Chapter One of the Tsungpao edition, where it follows the preceding section. However, for the second half of this section, the Tsungpao edition has this: “And so at midnight, I received the Dharma without anyone knowing.

He then transmitted the direct teaching and the robe and bowl to me and said, ‘You are now the Sixth Patriarch. Take good care of yourself and liberate beings everywhere and spread the teaching to the next generation. Don't let it be cut off. My gatha goes, “A living being plants a seed / fruit grows from the causal ground / without a being there's no seed / without a nature



there's no life.'” (ed. These last two lines champion the view of the buddha nature held by the Huayen School of Buddhism as opposed to that of the Tientai School, which held that even rocks can become buddhas.)

The Patriarch then said, ‘In the past when Bodhidharma first came to this land, no one believed him, so he transmitted this robe as an embodiment of trust to be handed down from one generation to the next. But the Dharma is transmitted from mind to mind, so that each person realizes and understands it for themselves. Since ancient times, buddha after buddha has only transmitted this essence, and teacher after teacher has secretly passed on this mind. But the robe has become a point of contention. With you it must end. If you transmit this robe, your life will hang by a thread. You must go quickly, otherwise someone might harm you.’

I asked, ‘Where shall I go?’

The Patriarch said, ‘When you reach Huai stop. And when you get to Hui go into seclusion.’ (ed. These are references to two counties near Kuangchou: Huaichi and Szuhui.)

And so at midnight I received the robe and the bowl. Then I said, ‘I’m from the South. I’m not at all familiar with the road down this mountain or where to find the ferry.’

The Fifth Patriarch said, ‘Don’t worry. I’ll take you there myself.’ And so the Patriarch saw me all the way to the Nine Rivers Ferry.”

**10. After receiving the robe and the Dharma, I left during the third watch, and the Fifth Patriarch accompanied me personally to the Nine Rivers Ferry. As I boarded, we said good-bye, and the Patriarch instructed me, ‘Go now. And**

**do your best to take the Dharma south. But don't spread this teaching for three years. Wait until the hard times are over before you go around teaching. And be skillful when you guide those who are deluded. Once they are able to open their minds, they are no different than those who are enlightened.' Our farewells done, I headed south.**

Given the personal transformation that occurs upon realizing our true nature, it isn't surprising that Zen biographies are full of such brief meetings and sudden separations. What's the point of lingering, especially when our life hangs by a thread? Also, there's a time to teach and a time to close our door. And then there's a time to become invisible. In transmitting the Dharma, timing is essential. To try to teach before we're ready to teach or before others are ready to listen is to harm everyone involved.

One of the great scenes in Zen hagiography is that of Bodhidharma crossing the Yangtze on a hollow reed, heading north after his meeting with Emperor Wu in Nanching. Here it is 150 years later, and the Dharma finally crosses the Yangtze again. But this time it is heading south. And this time it is not a foreign teaching. And while Bodhidharma found few who were ready to see their own nature, Hui-neng opened the minds of hundreds, if not thousands, during his lifetime.

**I left during the third watch.** The Huihsin edition, with which the Chisung and Tsungpao editions more or less agree, continues with this account: "The Fifth Patriarch accompanied me all the way to the Nine Rivers Ferry, where we found a small boat. He told me to climb aboard then picked up the oar and began rowing. (ed. In this part of China, boats are still propelled with a single oar, or skull, at the stern.)

I said, 'Please, Master, sit down. It's only right that I should do the rowing.'

The Fifth Patriarch said, 'It's only right that I ferry you across. How could you possibly ferry me across?'

I said, 'When I was deluded, the Master had to ferry me across. But now that I'm awake, it's only right that I row you across the river. Although the "ferrying" is the same, the functions are different.'

The Fifth Patriarch said, 'So they are, so they are. In the future, the Buddhadharma will flourish greatly because of you. Three years from now, I will depart this world. Go now and do your best. Head south and don't try to teach too soon. The Buddhadharma is hard to bring forth.'"

According to *The Records of Shen-hui*, "Hung-jen said, 'I'll see you off.' And that night he accompanied Hui-neng to the Nine Rivers Ferry. After he found a boat to take Hui-neng across, he watched him cross the river and returned to the monastery that night without anyone finding out." (55)

The distance from the monastery to the north shore of the Yangtze was about fifty kilometers. Hence, to reach the river, let alone cross it, and return to the monastery that night would seem to carry the story a bit too far. However, the monastery did have stables for horses.

**Nine Rivers Ferry.** The nine rivers refer to those that flow into the Yangtze near the town of Chiuchiang. During the T'ang dynasty, the government established ferries every fifteen kilometers along navigable stretches of the Yangtze to speed the transshipment of goods and people. This particular ferry took people from the north shore of the Yangtze to Chiuchiang on the south shore.

**As I boarded, we said good-bye.** The Tunhuang Cave copy has: “As I boarded, I woke up.” Since Hui-neng’s “realization” occurred earlier that night, and since he was unlikely to have dozed off while traveling to the river, I’ve followed the Tunhuang Museum copy, with which later editions agree.

**Don’t spread this teaching for three years.** The amount of time suggested for remaining in seclusion is handled differently in different editions. Both Tunhuang editions have “three years,” the Huihsin edition has “five years,” and the Chisung and Tsungpao editions have simply, “Don’t try to teach too soon.” According to Fa-hai’s account, Hui-neng received the robe and Dharma of Hung-jen in 661 and didn’t reveal himself as the Sixth Patriarch until 676. But we can see from the above interpolation in the Huihsin, Chisung, and Tsungpao editions that Hung-jen foretells his death in three years. Since he died in 675, this event would have occurred around 672, which agrees with the date given in the *Chuantenglu*. Another factor in support of 672 is that three years was (and still is) the normal period for Buddhist and Taoist monks and nuns to live in seclusion. Also, three years is the customary time for mourning a parent or teacher. So perhaps this is what the Fifth Patriarch is referring to in the Tunhuang and Huihsin editions. Yang Zengwen, however, puts this event in 674, the year before Hung-jen died.

**Hard times.** It isn’t clear what conditions Hung-jen might be referring to. Kao-tsung, the emperor at the time (r. 649-683), was known for his antagonism toward Buddhism, but I’m not aware of any repressive measures that would have required lying low. Still, a series of bad harvests did occur in the Yangtze

region during the 670s. Also, Hung-jen might be referring to the country's deteriorating financial situation, which involved the debasing of currency and massive counterfeiting. Obviously, inflation was a serious problem. We have already seen a fee equivalent to 200 pounds of coins being paid for murals that were never painted. Suzuki avoids the problem by amending the Tunhuang Cave edition to agree with the Tsung-pao edition and by punctuating the line accordingly: "Do not teach for three years. This teaching is hard to bring forth." It is possible, however, to punctuate these lines differently: "Do not spread this for three years. This teaching is hard to foster. And later, when you do spread it, do so with skill."

**Open their minds.** Our minds are enclosed by veritable cities of delusion constructed over many lifetimes. Once we open our minds to the Dharma, the light of our buddha nature shines through, and even the thickest walls become transparent.

Suzuki amends the Tunhuang Cave edition here to read: "If they can open their minds, their understanding will be no different than mine." Again, he is following later editions as the basis for such an alteration. But the text is perfectly understandable as it stands, and the Tunhuang Museum copy, which I have followed, even more so.

**Textual note:** This section appears in Chapter One of the Tsungpao edition, where it follows the preceding section, but only after the intervening material quoted above.

**11. Less than two months later, I reached Tayu Ridge. Unknown to me, several hundred people had been chasing me, hoping to catch me and take away the Patriarch's**

robe. But they had all given up halfway, all except one monk, whose surname was Ch'en and whose Buddhist name was Hui-shun. He had previously been a general of the third grade, and he was a rough character. He caught up with me at the ridge, and 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 Hui-shun there at the ridge. He was ready to hear; and as soon as I spoke, his mind opened up. Then I told him to go back north and teach others.

People rob and kill and abuse and cheat each other for nothing. But for the Dharma, they won't even open a book, much less look into themselves. Rare is the person who will go to the lengths Hui-shun did to get hold of the Dharma. But if we stop to think about life and death, who wouldn't go to such lengths? And yet, we don't have to chase down Hui-neng. If what we truly want is the Dharma, where else will we find it, if not within ourselves? A dharma outside of ourselves is not worth chasing after. But usually we want something besides the Dharma: a robe, a title, disciples, patrons, learning, a halo, magic powers, even immortality. But the Dharma doesn't come with any accessories. Just the opposite. It frees us of accessories. As Lao-tzu said, "Those who seek learning gain every day / those who seek the Way lose every day." (*Taoteching*: 48)

**Less than two months later:** In the Tsungpao edition, we are told that Hui-neng traveled from Kuangchou to Huangmei in a month or so.

But here he travels a little more than half that distance in twice

the time. The reason for the apparent inconsistency is that on his way to Huangmei, half the trip would have been by boat down the Kan River. And on his way back, he would have had to work his way up the same river, probably on foot.

**Tayu Ridge.** Tayu was the name of the village near the headwaters of the Kan River and also the name of the ridge separating what are now the provinces of Kiangsi and Kuangtung. This was the location of Meiling Pass, which was one of the two major passes used to reach the southernmost part of the empire. The other was the Chitienling Pass near the village of Yichang, which was reached by following the Hsiang River to its source in the watershed to the west.

**Hui-shun.** The Huihsin, Chisung, and Tsungpao editions all give this man's monastic name as Hui-ming. This is also supported by the *Sung Kaosengchuan*, which adds that he was from nearby Poyang (the future pottery center of Chingtechen) and was a descendant of Emperor Hsuan-ti (r. 569-582) of the Ch'en dynasty. He was also a disciple of the Fifth Patriarch, but after this incident he acknowledged Hui-neng as his teacher.

**A general of the third grade.** There were nine grades in the bureaucratic system of ancient China, with the two highest reserved for senior ministers. A general of the third grade would have been among the highest-ranking officials in the country. Hence, the Huihsin, Chisung, and Tsungpao editions, as well as *The Records of Shen-hui*, have lowered this man's rank a notch to the more likely "general of the fourth grade."

**Go back north.** Instead of south, the direction Hui-neng was

traveling. According to the account in later editions, Hui-neng told Hui-shun to settle on Mengshan, 300 kilometers to the north. If he did, he didn't stay there permanently. He ended up in Huchou, on the south shore of Lake Taihu, and served as the abbot of Fochuan Temple, where his grave inscription was recorded on a pagoda.

After this line, the Huihsin edition adds these oft-quoted lines: 'I told Hui-ming (ed. Hui-shun), 'When you're not thinking of anything good and not thinking of anything bad, at that very moment, what is your original face?' (ed. The Chisung and Tsungpao editions turn this question into a statement: 'at that very moment, that is your original face.') Hui-ming immediately experienced a great awakening." Although the Huihsin edition wasn't compiled until 967, this account also appears in Huang-po's *Chuanhsin fayao*. (See *The Zen Teaching of Huang Po* translated by John Blofeld, p. 65, which was published in 1957.)

**Textual note:** This section appears in Chapter One of the Tsungpao edition, where it follows the preceding section. However, the Huihsin, Chisung, and Tsungpao editions add a lengthy account here that segues into the next section. Variations on this also appear in the *Tsaohsitashih piehchuan* and the *Litai fapaochi*, two texts composed around 780. However, none of this is mentioned in Fa-hai's edition of the sutra, nor in his introduction, nor in the *Liutsutashih yuanchi waichi*, nor in Wang Wei's inscription, nor in either Tunhuang copy. The fullest version is that of the Tsungpao edition, which begins with Hui-ming's awakening:

"He then asked, 'In addition to the secret language and secret teaching you have handed down, is there any other secret teaching?'



I said, 'What I have taught you is not a secret. If you reflect on it, you'll find the secret is within you.'

Hui-ming said, 'Although I was at Huangmei, I never really looked at my own face. Today, due to your instruction, I feel like someone who tastes water. Whether it's hot or cold is something we have to find out for ourselves. Lay brother, you are now my teacher.'

I said, 'If that is so, then we are both disciples of the Fifth Patriarch. Take good care of yourself.'

Hui-ming also asked, 'Where should I go now?'

I said, 'When you get to Yuanchou (ed. Yichun, 300 kilometers north of Tayu Ridge), stop. And when you reach Mount Meng, stay there.'

Hui-ming bowed and headed back down the mountain and told the others giving chase, 'I climbed into the cliffs, but there was no sign of his trail. You'd better look for him somewhere else.' And they all believed him. Hui-ming later changed his name to Tao-ming to avoid using my first name.

After I obtained the Dharma, I returned from Huangmei and settled in Tsaohou Village near Shaochou (ed. Shaokuan. Note, too, that this and the next two paragraphs also appear in the *Chuantenglu*. But the *Chuantenglu* has these events taking place on Hui-neng's trip north, which seems to me more reasonable than the traditional sequence), where no one knew me. There was a local scholar there named Liu Chih-lueh who treated me with great respect. He had an aunt who was a Buddhist nun named Wu-chin-tsang, who was always chanting the *Nirvana Sutra*. After listening for a while, I understood its profound meaning, and I explained it to her. When she showed me the text and asked me the meaning of a particular character, I said, 'I don't know how to read. Ask me about the meaning of

the text.'

The nun said, 'If you don't know how to read, how can you understand the meaning?'

I said, 'The profound truths of the buddhas don't depend on words.'

The nun looked at me differently after that and told the village elders, 'This is a man of the Way. You should offer him your support.' And so the villagers, including a man named Ts'ao Shu-liang, who was a descendant of the Marquis of Wei (ed. Ts'ao Ts'ao), competed in paying their respects. At that time Paolin Monastery (ed. on Tsaohsi Mountain) was in ruins due to the fires of war that marked the end of the Sui dynasty. They rebuilt the temple on the old foundations and invited me to stay there, and it soon became a center of practice. I lived there for more than nine months. But a group of evildoers chased me down again. When I hid on a nearby mountain, they set fire to it and burned all the vegetation. But I escaped by wedging myself between some rocks. The rocks still have the marks from where I crouched and the pattern of my robe. This is why the place is called Refuge Rock. (ed. This rock has recently been rediscovered near the top of the mountain opposite Paolin [Nanhua] Temple.)

I remembered what the Fifth Patriarch told me about going into hiding between Huai and Hui (ed. the counties of Huaichi and Szuhui, some fifty kilometers west of Kuangchou). So I left and hid out between these two places. (ed. The foregoing passage, beginning with "After I obtained the Dharma . . .," is moved to the beginning of Chapter Seven in some copies of the Tsungpao edition.) And I stayed with a band of hunters in Szuhui. Altogether I stayed there for fifteen years. (ed. This would agree with Fa-hai's account but not with most other

accounts, which limit this period of seclusion, if it can be called that, to two or three years.) And sometimes I taught them the Dharma, as circumstances permitted. Whenever they told me to take care of their nets, if I saw a creature in them, I set it free. And at every meal, I added vegetables to their pot of meat. When they asked me about this, I told them they should have some vegetables along with their meat.

Finally, I realized I couldn't hide out forever and the time had come for me to spread the Dharma. So I left and went to Fahsing Temple in Kuangchou. At that time, Master Yin-tsung was lecturing on the *Nirvana Sutra*, and the wind was blowing a flag. One monk said it was the wind that was moving. Another monk said it was the flag that was moving. They wouldn't stop arguing, so I stepped forward and said, 'It isn't the wind that's moving, and it isn't the flag that's moving. It's your minds that are moving.' The whole assembly was startled.

Yin-tsung then invited me to take the seat of honor and asked me about some obscure points. Finding my answers to be clear and accurate but not based on book knowledge, he said, 'Our lay brother is certainly not an ordinary person. A long time ago I heard that the robe and the Dharma of Huangmei had come south. Could this be referring to you?'

I said, 'How could I presume?'

Yin-tsung then bowed and asked me to show everyone the robe and the bowl that had been passed down to me. He also asked me what instructions I had received from Huang-mei. (ed. Zen masters often took on the name of the place where they taught.) I said, 'I didn't receive any instructions. The only thing he talked about was seeing our nature. He didn't talk about meditation or liberation.'

Yin-tsung said, 'Why didn't he talk about meditation or

liberation?’

I said, ‘Because these two teachings are not the teaching of buddhas. The teaching of buddhas is a teaching beyond duality.’

Yin-tsung asked, ‘What is the teaching of buddhas beyond duality?’

I answered, ‘The abbot has been lecturing on the *Nirvana Sutra*, which explains that the buddha nature is the teaching of buddhas beyond duality. For example, when the noble King of Virtue Bodhisattva asked the Buddha, “If someone commits the four serious offenses, or is guilty of the five unpardonable crimes, or is an icchantika (ed. someone who maligns the Dharma and denies their own buddha nature), having cut off their roots of goodness, do they still have the buddha nature?” And the Buddha replied, “There are two kinds of roots of goodness. One is permanent, and the other is impermanent. But the buddha nature is neither permanent nor impermanent.” Thus, what cannot be cut off is what is meant by “beyond duality.” There are things in us that are good and things that are bad, but the buddha nature is neither good nor bad. This is what is meant by “beyond duality.” Most people view the skandhas and dhatus (ed. Abidharma categories used in the analysis of reality) differently, but those who are wise understand that their nature is beyond duality. The nature that is beyond duality is the buddha nature.’

When Yin-tsung heard this, he was overjoyed. He bowed and said, ‘My explanation of the sutra is like rubble, while your discourse on the meaning is like pure gold.’ He then shaved off my hair (ed. The stupa containing his hair is still there, as is the inscription recording the event) and asked me to become his master. Thus, under the bodhi tree (ed. in the courtyard of Fahsing Temple—now called Kuanghsiao Temple), I opened the

East Mountain Dharma Gate (ed. the name of the Fifth Patriarch's teaching). Ever since I received the teaching on East Mountain, I have suffered hardships, and my life has hung by a thread. But I have come here today . . .” This extended account now links up with the next section, thus bringing Hui-neng back to the audience before whom he addressed this talk at the beginning of the sutra.

## PART II (SECTIONS 12-37)

12. I have come here today because I have a connection of many lifetimes with you officials, clerics, and laypeople. This teaching has been passed down by the ancients. It isn't something I discovered by myself. But if you wish to hear this teaching of the ancients, you must listen with pure minds. And if you wish to get rid of your delusions, you should understand it as past generations have.

Hui-neng then yelled out, "Good friends! You already possess the prajna wisdom of enlightenment! But because your minds are deluded, you can't understand by yourselves. You need to find a truly good friend to show you the way to see your nature. Good friends, buddha nature isn't different for the ignorant and the wise. It's just that people are deluded or awake. When people are deluded, they're ignorant. When they wake up, they become wise.

Hui-neng ends his account of how he came into possession of this teaching, and now he passes it on to us. But first he makes sure we are ready for it by urging us to listen without becoming distracted by our usual phantasmagoria of delusion. Hui-neng taught for over forty years, but he only taught one teaching, which was the same teaching Bodhidharma brought to China: We are all buddhas, we just don't know it. Still, not everyone wants to hear this teaching. This is because the world of delusion we have constructed over countless lifetimes can be so convincing and so satisfying, few of us call it into question. It isn't until our lives are so fraught with contradiction and

suffering, and we can barely hold them together, that we finally begin to ask questions and look for answers. At that moment, we need a good friend to show us the way out of this house of cards that burns with the fires of anger and greed. And Hui-neng is a truly good friend.

To make this text easier to work with, I have divided the fifty-seven sections into which Keiki and Suzuki edited the Tunhuang copies into four parts. Part One is a biographical sketch of Huineng's spiritual career. Part Two presents what might be called the highlights of Hui-neng's teaching. Although I have not done so, readers might want to further divide Part Two into another four parts: In Sections 12-19, Hui-neng introduces us to his view of meditation and wisdom; in Sections 20-23, he transmits the precepts of Zen; in Sections 24-30, he explains the teaching of Prajnaparamita on which these precepts are based; and in Sections 31-37, he interprets other practices in the light of such a teaching and finally concludes the talk that began at Tafa Temple in Section 1. Part Three (Sections 38-44) further expands Hui-neng's teaching through a series of exchanges with disciples. And Part Four (Sections 45-57) focuses on the transmission of the sutra itself as well as the understanding on which it is based.

**Connection.** This refers to the force of our previous thoughts, words, and deeds that brings us together or tears us apart. Our karma also brings us together with the Dharma or makes it impossible for us to hear or understand it. The fact that this sutra has now fallen into our hands suggests we are not totally hopeless. It should be noted, however, that the Buddhist concept of karma is different from the Western concept of fate. Karma merely sets the stage. Fate gives us the play already

written.

**This teaching.** Whenever Hui-neng refers to the teaching he teaches, he means the direct teaching of Prajnaparamita, the Perfection of Wisdom.

**The ancients.** This refers to the primordial buddhas as well as to the various patriarchs and matriarchs who have taught this mind-to-mind teaching.

**Listen with pure minds.** As long as we're distracted, not only is it hard for us to understand this teaching, it's impossible.

**Delusions.** Buddhists use this word in reference to four mistaken beliefs: the belief that something that is impermanent is permanent, the belief that something that is impure is pure, the belief that something that is painful is pleasurable, and the belief that something that has no independent existence has independent existence. All of our delusions can be subsumed under one of these four mistaken beliefs.

**Prajna wisdom.** As he does elsewhere, Hui-neng is not only differentiating this radical form of wisdom from our mundane wisdom and its world of objects, he is also differentiating it from the metaphysical wisdom of Hinayana Buddhism and its world of dharmas. *Prajna* means "before knowledge," and knowledge, according to the Mahayana, is just another name for delusion. Hence, prajna is our original mind, our mind before we know anything, before there is a person who knows or something known. This non-dual nature is our original nature, our buddha nature.



**Enlightenment.** This refers to the perception of things and dharmas as they really are, as no-things and no-dharmas, as full of light. It is perception without a perceiver or object perceived. There isn't any other enlightenment. Our enlightenment is the same as every buddha's.

**Buddha nature.** This term is actually redundant. Our nature is buddhahood, and buddhahood is our nature. Hui-neng most likely first learned of this concept from the second Chinese translation of the *Nirvana Sutra*, which was one of the most popular sutras in his day. It has since passed into near obscurity, and I know of no English translation of this important Mahayana text, which is radically different from its counterpart in the Theravada canon.

**Buddha nature isn't different for the ignorant and the wise. It's just that people are deluded or awake. When people are deluded they're ignorant.** These lines are missing in the Tunhuang Cave edition.

**Textual note:** The first paragraph of this section appears at the end of Chapter One in the Tsungpao edition and the second paragraph at the beginning of Chapter Two.

**13. Good friends, this Dharma teaching of mine is based on meditation and wisdom. But don't make the mistake of thinking that meditation and wisdom are separate. Meditation and wisdom are of one essence and not two. Meditation is the body of wisdom, and wisdom is the function of meditation. Wherever you find wisdom, you find meditation. And wherever you find meditation, you**

**find wisdom. Good friends, what this means is that meditation and wisdom are the same.**

**Fellow students of the Way, be careful. Don't think that meditation comes first and then gives rise to wisdom or that wisdom comes first and then gives rise to meditation or that meditation and wisdom are separate. For those who hold such views, the Dharma is dualistic: If the mouth speaks of goodness, but the mind doesn't think of goodness, meditation and wisdom aren't the same. But if goodness pervades both the mouth and the mind, if what is external and internal are alike, then meditation and wisdom are the same.**

**The cultivation of self-awareness does not involve argument. People who argue about which comes first and which comes second only confuse themselves. Unless you put an end to right and wrong, you will give rise to self-existent dharmas, and you will never be free of the Four States.**

Having asked us to rid our minds of impurities, Hui-neng now directs our attention to this mind. Every teaching of Buddhism concerns the mind. And every teaching of the mind is based on meditation and wisdom. Many people think of meditation as sitting down and not moving and of wisdom as thinking up great ideas and making insightful pronouncements. But for Hui-neng, meditation is not about our physical body, and wisdom is not about our mental ability. By means of wisdom, we see our true body, our buddha nature. And by means of meditation, we put our true body into action, we become a buddha.

Hui-neng also addresses these remarks to an ongoing debate over the status and relationship of meditation and wisdom that

was taking place in Buddhist circles in China. Rather than engage in such disputes as to which comes first and how each should be understood and practiced, Hui-neng leads practitioners back to their own minds and away from conceptual frameworks that only confuse people.

**Meditation and wisdom.** In traditional Buddhism, morality, meditation, and wisdom were said to form the *tri-skandha*, or three pillars, of practice. During the sixth century, a number of Buddhist teachers in China, for example Chih-yi, the founder of the Tientai School of Buddhism, were especially interested in the relationship between the latter two. Meanwhile, other schools, such as the Precept School of Tao-hsuan, focused on the *vinaya*, or monastic code, as the basis of practice.

Among the meditations taught by Buddhist teachers, the most common involve concentrating on our breath, on a point inside or outside our body, on visualization, on recitation, on movement, on good thoughts, or simply on our own nature, which is the practice advocated in Zen. But to perform any of these meditations requires the constant support and involvement of wisdom, otherwise we wouldn't be engaged in such practices in the first place. Also, when we concentrate our mind, sooner or later we have to examine the nature of what we are concentrating, and this also requires the application of wisdom. Thus, any differentiation between the two can only be relative. There is no real difference.

**Meditation and wisdom are of one essence and not two.** D. T. Suzuki's Tunhuang Cave edition has "meditation and wisdom are of one essence and not two," and in this it is supported by the Tsungpao edition as well as by Hui-neng's own conclusion in the same section, and also by the *Nirvana Sutra*. However, the

Tunhuang Museum copy has “meditation and wisdom have neither one essence nor two.” The Tunhuang Museum copy is clearly wrong here. Hence, in this case I have followed the Tunhuang Cave edition.

**Body . . . function.** These categories were used in China by a number of philosophical schools to analyze reality in much the same way scientists nowadays analyze “matter” as particles (body) or waves (function). These have nothing to do with reality. They simply represent convenient points of view for what cannot be viewed.

**Meditation and wisdom are the same.** Hui-neng is quoting from the *Nirvana Sutra*, which states, “When your meditation and wisdom are the same, you can see everything.” (T12, p. 547a) In the *Records of Shen-hui* (19), “Master Che asks, ‘What does it mean to say that meditation and wisdom are the same?’ Shen-hui answered, ‘When thoughts don’t arise, and nothing at all is present, this is called “true meditation.” To be able to see thoughts not arising and nothing at all present is called “true wisdom.” If you are capable of this, wherever there is meditation, there is the body of wisdom; and wherever there is wisdom, there is the function of meditation. Thus, when there is meditation, it is not separate from wisdom, and when there is wisdom, it is not separate from meditation. Thus, where there is meditation, there is wisdom; and where there is wisdom, there is meditation. And where there is meditation, there is no meditation. And where there is wisdom, there is no wisdom. And why is this? Because it is their nature that is real. This is what the cultivation of meditation and wisdom as the same means.’”

**Fellow students of the Way.** Shen-hui attributes the opinions attacked in this and the following paragraph to a Zen monk named Master Ch'eng, about whom nothing more is known.

**The Dharma is dualistic.** The teaching of Hui-neng is opposed to dualism (but without being opposed to any form of dualism). This is because it is dualism that separates us from ourselves, from our buddha nature. Dualism involves dividing any given universe of discourse into subject and object, right and wrong, here and there, now and then, p and q. But our buddha nature isn't subject to division. It is impervious to the knife of our minds. It is the knife of our minds. Have some cake with your tea.

**If the mouth speaks of goodness, but the mind doesn't think of goodness.** In a dualistic world, first one thing happens, then the next thing happens. In the case of goodness, does someone first speak of goodness then think of goodness? Or does someone first think of goodness then speak of goodness? As with the chicken and the egg, do we begin with the internal and proceed to the external, or is it the other way around? Likewise, if meditation and wisdom are separate, and one precedes the other, then how do we begin, and how do we end?

**The cultivation of self-awareness.** Hui-neng's teaching is not dualistic but based on our original and undifferentiated wisdom, which is the nature of all buddhas. Hui-neng, however, uses duality to direct his students away from extremes back to themselves. See, for example, his list of pairs in Sections 45 and 46.

**Self-existent dharmas.** Among Buddhists, the defining quality that separates one thing from another was called *sva-bhava*: “self-existence.” This term was applied to dharmas as well as to beings. Just as we think of ourselves as having a “self,” we also think of things and concepts as having an independent existence. However, it is the analysis of dharmas and beings, the search for their self-existent qualities, and the realization that neither dharmas nor beings possess a self or self-existence that results in liberation.

**Four States.** These usually refer to the four states of self-existence, self, being, life, and soul, which are listed throughout the *Diamond Sutra* as the principal means we use to define the self-existence of any entity, be it a dharma or a person. As used by Buddhists, “self” and “being” refer to the two axes of the spatial dimension (inside/ outside), and “life” and “soul” refer to those of the temporal dimension (now/then). In the *Lankavatara*, however, the same term refers to the four phases that any entity passes through: origination, duration, differentiation, and cessation. Regardless of which of these Hui-neng had in mind, his concern here is that arguments of a philosophical nature are purely speculative and likely to increase attachment to notions of a self. Better to have that cup of tea.

**Textual note:** This section appears at the beginning of Chapter Four in the Tsungpao edition. Also, at the end of this section, the Tsungpao edition continues with what is Section 15 in the Tunhuang edition.

**14. One Practice Samadhi means at all times, whether**

walking, standing, sitting, or lying down, always practicing with a straightforward mind. The *Vimalakirti Sutra* says, ‘A straightforward mind is the place of enlightenment,’ and ‘a straightforward mind is the pure land.’ Don’t practice hypocrisy with your mind, while you talk about being straightforward with your mouth. If you speak about One Practice Samadhi with your mouth, but you don’t practice with a straightforward mind, you’re no disciple of the Buddha. Simply practice with a straightforward mind and don’t become attached to any dharma. This is what is meant by One Practice Samadhi.

Deluded people who cling to the external attributes of a dharma get hold of One Practice Samadhi and just say that sitting motionless, eliminating delusions, and not thinking thoughts are One Practice Samadhi. But if that were true, a dharma like that would be the same as lifelessness and would constitute an obstruction of the Way instead. The Way has to flow freely. Why block it up? The Way flows freely when the mind doesn’t dwell on any dharma. Once it dwells on something, it becomes bound. If sitting motionless were right, Vimalakirti wouldn’t have criticized Shariputra for meditating in the forest.

Good friends, I know there are people who tell others to devote themselves to sitting and contemplating their minds or purity and not to move or to think. Deluded people are unaware, so they turn things upside down with their attachments. There are hundreds of such people who teach the Way like this. But they are, you should know, greatly mistaken.

When Hui-neng told his audience to purify their minds, his

teaching was over. The rest of his sermon at Tafa Temple was meant to prevent people from misunderstanding such a simple teaching. Normally, this is the first step in meditation practice, purifying our minds. But he tells us to stop right there. He doesn't instruct us any further in meditation, because to do so would be to differentiate meditation from this pure mind of ours. As long as our minds are pure, it doesn't matter if we're sitting, walking, standing, or lying down. A pure mind is One Practice Samadhi. And all that matters in the practice of One Practice Samadhi is a pure, straightforward mind. This is meditation, and this is wisdom. Meditation and wisdom are only separate for those who are deluded. All that matters is a straightforward, pure mind.

Hui-neng's teaching doesn't go beyond this: As long as we remain straightforward in our thoughts, words, and deeds, the rest will happen of its own accord. The rest being the realization of our buddha nature. Any practice that involves creating a division between subject and object is not only doomed to failure, it is bound to lead practitioners so far astray they will have to wait for another lifetime and for another encounter with a truly good friend before they can approach their own place of enlightenment again. Likewise, any practice that involves eliminating subject and object is also doomed to failure. We cannot eliminate what isn't there.

**Samadhi.** This is a Sanskrit term that refers to the concentration of the mind on a single object to the point where the separation of the object from the subject disappears. As with most Buddhist terms, Hui-neng uses this somewhat differently. Normally, it is understood as a state of concentration attained during meditation. But for Huineng, it is the practice to be



engaged in at all times in all places: namely, the state of a straightforward mind, which is no state at all.

**One Practice Samadhi.** In the *Perfection of Wisdom in Seven Hundred Lines*, Manjushri asks the Buddha, “Bhagavan, what is One Practice Samadhi?” And the Buddha replies, “When the Dharma Realm (ed. another name for what we might call the universe) has but one attribute, and you focus all your efforts on the Dharma Realm, this is what is meant by One Practice Samadhi.” Some Zen masters hold up one finger. Hui-neng tells his disciples to practice with a straightforward mind. Elsewhere, he says to see your nature. This is one and the same practice, just different words.

**Walking, standing, sitting, or lying down.** These four positions summarize the aspects of bodily behavior covered by the precepts.

**Straightforward.** Other possible translations for *chih*: “straightforward” are “honest,” “sincere,” and “direct.”

**A straightforward mind is the place of enlightenment.** In the *Vimalakirti Sutra* (4), Kuang-yen Bodhisattva reports that one day when he was leaving the city of Vaisali just as Vimalakirti was arriving, he bowed and asked the famous layman where he was coming from. Vimalakirti replied, “I am coming from the place of enlightenment.” When Kuang-yen asked where this place of enlightenment was, Vimalakirti replied, “A straightforward mind is the place of enlightenment because it is free of falsehood.” Of course, Vimalakirti continued to list thirty other places of enlightenment, such as the vow to attain buddhahood, but this was considered the first step in a person’s

practice without which the other steps are impossible.

**A straightforward mind is the pure land.** Again, in the *Vimalakirti Sutra*, the Buddha lists eighteen places that can serve as a bodhisattva's pure land, but he begins with "a straightforward mind is a bodhisattva's pure land, because when bodhisattvas become buddhas, beings free of deceit will be reborn in their realms." (1)

**Vimalakirti wouldn't have criticized Shariputra.** Yet again, Huineng draws on the *Vimalakirti Sutra*. In Chapter Three of that text, when the Buddha asks Shariputra to call on the sick layman, Shariputra declines, saying, "I remember in the past when I was meditating at the foot of a tree in the forest, Vimalakirti came up to me and said, 'Shariputra, this isn't meditation. Meditation means not letting your body or mind appear in the Three Realms (ed. Desire, Form, and Formlessness). Meditation means conducting your life without leaving the stillness of samadhi. Meditation means engaging in ordinary activities without giving up the teachings of the Way. Meditation means not letting your mind dwell internally or externally. Meditation means cultivating the thirty-seven aids to enlightenment while remaining unmoved by any views. Meditation means entering nirvana without putting an end to passion. If you can meditate like this, you are ready for the approval of a buddha.'"

**They turn things upside down.** Normally, the expression *tien-tao*: "upside-down" refers to the four views that distort reality: claiming what is actually impermanent, painful, impure, or partial is permanent, blissful, pure, or whole. But here, Hui-neng is referring to those who put sitting and contemplating purity ahead

of the wisdom they claim arises from such contemplation. One Practice Samadhi refers to the practice whereby neither meditation nor wisdom precedes the other.

**There are hundreds of such people.** Clearly, Hui-neng must have felt his understanding of Zen was in the minority. However, he was in no doubt as to whose understanding was correct and whose was mistaken.

**Textual note:** This section appears in Chapter Four of the Tsungpao edition, where it follows, rather than precedes, Section 15.

**15. Good friends, what are meditation and wisdom like? They're like a lamp and its light. When there's a lamp, there's light. When there's no lamp, there's no light. The lamp is the light's body, and light is the lamp's function. They have two names but not two bodies. This teaching concerning meditation and wisdom is also like this.**

Hui-neng has told us that the relationship between meditation and wisdom isn't temporal. Neither precedes the other. Here, he tells us that their relationship isn't spatial. Neither exists apart from the other. This is why Hui-neng combines them in One Practice Samadhi. One body, one function.

Hui-neng does not teach people to assume a meditation posture, then to focus their attention on their breath or some other object of contemplation, then to enter into a trance state of oneness with that object, and having done so, then to give rise to wisdom. He teaches people, that whether they sit, walk, stand,

or lie down, to use the lamp of meditation to fill the ten directions with the light of wisdom. Hui-neng does not teach one kind of Zen for beginners and another kind for advanced students. He only teaches One Practice Samadhi, for one mind, the buddha mind, which is no mind, and which is our original nature.

**They're like a lamp and its light.** Metaphors are never as good as what they represent. Still, this is a serviceable one, as long as we don't demand too much from it. After all, we can have a lamp but no light, and we can have light but no lamp. But if we cultivate One Practice Samadhi, we can't have meditation without wisdom, nor can we have wisdom without meditation. Meditation without wisdom is Dead Tree Zen. Wisdom without meditation is Pie in the Sky Zen.

**They have two names but not two bodies.** In the *Heart Sutra*, Avalokiteshvara says, "Form is emptiness, emptiness is form / emptiness is not separate from form, form is not separate from emptiness." And in the *Taoteching*, Lao-tzu says, "Two different names / for one and the same / the one we call dark / the dark beyond dark / the door to all beginnings." (1)

**Textual note:** In the Tsungpao edition, this section precedes, rather than follows, the previous section.

**16. Good friends, the Dharma isn't direct or indirect. It's people who are sharp or dull. For those who are deluded, there is indirect persuasion. For those who are aware, there is direct cultivation: Know your mind and see your**

**nature. For those who are aware, there is basically no separation. For those who aren't aware, there are infinite kalpas on the Wheel of Rebirth.**

Hui-neng is not unaware that people have different capabilities, but he is concerned that practitioners might use such differences to justify different kinds of liberation, different kinds of enlightenment. From the point of view of reality, if it can be called a point of view, there are no distinctions. It is we who make distinctions. We doodle until we doodle up a self and a universe to go with it. But distinctions are the stuff of delusion. Hui-neng does not want to encourage more distinctions, more stuff, that will only lead to more yard sales of the mind. One day Layman P'ang loaded all his stuff into a boat, rowed out to the middle of a lake, and sank it. Of course, this only works if you know how to swim.

**Direct or indirect.** The Chinese terms *tun* and *chien* can also be translated as “sudden” and “gradual.” But they are used by Hui-neng as synonyms for “straightforward” and “deceitful,” “pure” and “impure.” Hence, time is not the issue, but attitude is. Translations aside, these terms became the battle cry of Shen-hui and later followers of Hui-neng who felt that Zen was being misrepresented, if not distorted, by monks who were teaching their disciples to cultivate an understanding that proceeded indirectly and by stages. Judging from his initial comment in the next section, Hui-neng himself does not appear to have been so concerned.

**Indirect persuasion . . . direct cultivation.** This is the reading in both Tunhuang editions. The Tsungpao edition has *chien-hsiu*: “indirect cultivation” and *tun-ch'i*: “direct agreement.”

**Know your mind and see your nature.** This is Hui-neng's motto, his teaching in a single breath. When Hui-neng uses the word "mind," he uses it with two senses. Sometimes, it refers to the mind of discrimination, the eight kinds of consciousness. But he also uses it to refer to the true mind, the mind of awareness. When he uses it with the latter sense, he often pairs it with "nature." Again, this is similar to the particle/wave approach noted earlier. Our mind is the body, our nature is its function. The Chinese character for "nature" shows the mind giving birth. Thus, our mind is the source of all things, all dharmas, all thoughts. Our nature is the mind in action. Meanwhile, our mind is who we really are, our real body. When we know who we really are and see what we really do, we are finally able to taste the tea. The Tunhuang Museum copy garbles this line a bit. Hence, I have followed the wording of the Tunhuang Cave copy and the Tsungpao edition.

**No separation.** Since there is no distance between us and our minds and our minds and what is real, the terms "direct" and "indirect" are not relevant. They are only relevant in a world of delusion, where one thing, one person, or one dharma is separated from other things, persons, or dharmas.

**For those who aren't aware.** This last sentence is missing in the Tsungpao edition.

**Infinite kalpas.** A kalpa is the longest imaginable period of time. An infinite kalpa is even longer.

**Wheel of Rebirth.** Like many other religious sects of ancient

India, early Buddhists talked about rebirth. But they did not agree with those who believed in the existence of a self or a soul, either in this life or the next. What they proposed in its place was the operation of the Law of Karma. Every thought, word, or deed, they held, has repercussions, and what is reborn are the effects of thoughts, words, and deeds generated by belief in a self or soul. Buddhists call this *avidya*: “ignorance.” It is ignorance that is “reborn.” Like a grain of sand placed inside an oyster, a single thought of “self” gathers around it a whole universe of iridescent luster. But nothing actually passes from one life to the next. It is just that one thought of ignorance leads to another thought of ignorance, but the particular thought involved in rebirth is the belief in a self. Buddhists often portray this cycle of endless rebirth as a wheel held in the clutches of a being named Yama, who, like Pluto, judges the dead.

**Textual note:** This section appears in Chapter Four of the Tsungpao edition, where it follows Section 14, instead of Section 15.

**17. Good friends, since ancient times, this Dharma teaching of ours, both its direct and indirect versions, has proclaimed ‘no thought’ as its doctrine, ‘no form’ as its body, and ‘no attachment’ as its foundation.**

**What do we mean by a form that is ‘no form’? To be free of form in the presence of forms. And ‘no thought’? Not to think about thoughts. And ‘no attachment,’ which is everyone’s basic nature? Thought after thought, not to become attached. 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, the dharma body becomes separated from the material body. When you go from one thought to another, don't become attached to any dharma. Once one thought becomes attached, every thought becomes attached, which is what we call 'bondage.' But when you go from one thought to another without becoming attached to any dharma, there's no bondage. This is why 'no attachment' is our foundation.**

This section provides some hints as to the structure behind Huineng's teaching. I sometimes imagine this as a tree: "no attachment" is the root, "no form" is the trunk, and "no thought" is the foliage. And sometimes I see it in analytic terms, where "thought" refers to the subject, "form" the object, and "attachment" the relationship between the two. Interpretations aside, the point of this is the word "no." Whether we think of our minds in terms of space or time or any other conceptual framework, Hui-neng urges us to make no separations, no interruptions in the flow of our thoughts. To interrupt our thoughts is to make them into something that they are not and thus to create a false mind of our true mind.

A number of commentators have viewed these terms as the essence of Hui-neng's teaching. Yin-shun says, "No form as the body, no attachment as the foundation, and no thought as the doctrine, this is the method of practice handed down by the *Platform Sutra*." (*Chungkuo chantsungshih*, p. 357)

**Direct and indirect versions.** In their attacks on indirect cultivation, disciples such as Shen-hui obviously ignored this statement, which not only acknowledges the need to adapt Zen to the different capacities of people but also warns against



engaging in arguments concerning doctrine. Naturally, this line is deleted in the Tsungpao edition lest it cause confusion among the more myopic successors to Shen-hui.

**‘No attachment’ as its foundation.** Vimalakirti says, “From the root of non-attachment we bring forth all dharmas.” (*Vimalakirti Sutra*: 7)

**To be free of form in the presence of forms.** This is a paraphrase of one of the more famous lines in the *Diamond Sutra*, where the Buddha tells Subhuti, “By means of forms that are no forms the Tathagata can, indeed, be seen.” (5)

**Everyone’s basic nature.** After this phrase, the Tsungpao edition inserts this: “When you encounter the good and the bad, the beautiful and the ugly, all the hateful and cherished things of this world, even when words are harsh and deceitful, consider them all empty and don’t think of retaliation.”

**Once a thought is interrupted, the dharma body becomes separated from the material body.** Some commentators have suggested this line is an interpolation. It is, in fact, absent in the Tsungpao edition. However, it fits in with Hui-neng’s conception of the three bodies in Section 20 and also with his explanation of the relationship between thoughts and reality later in this section.

**Attachment.** Hui-neng apparently picked up the word *chu*: “attachment” from Chapter Four of Kumarajiva’s translation of the *Diamond Sutra*. It was reportedly upon hearing the line in the *Diamond Sutra*, *ying-wu-suo-chu er-sheng-ch’i-hsin*: “you should give rise to a thought without being attached to anything,” that Hui-neng experienced the realization that

completed his training.

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

To be unaffected by any object is what is meant by ‘no thought,’ to be free of objects in our thoughts and not to give rise to thoughts about dharmas. But don’t think about nothing at all. Once your thoughts stop, you die and are reborn somewhere else. Students of the Way, take heed. Don’t misunderstand the meaning of this teaching. It’s one thing to be mistaken yourself, but quite another to lead others astray then to criticize the teaching of the sutras while remaining unaware that you yourself are lost. Thus, the reason we proclaim ‘no thought’ as our doctrine is because deluded people think in terms of objects, and on the basis of these thoughts they give rise to erroneous views. This is the origin of all afflictions and delusions.

Nevertheless, when this school proclaims ‘no thought’ as its doctrine, those people who transcend objects and who don’t give rise to thoughts, even though they have no thoughts, they do not then proclaim ‘no thought.’ What does ‘no’ negate? And what thought is ‘thought’ about? ‘No’ negates dualities and afflictions. And ‘thought’ is thought about the original nature of reality. Reality is the body of thought, and thought is the function of reality. When your nature gives rise to thought, even though you sense something, remain free and unaffected by the world of objects. The *Vimalakirti Sutra* says, ‘Externally, be skilled at distinguishing the attributes of dharmas, and

**internally, remain unshaken by the ultimate truth.'**

Here we have another view of Hui-neng's non-dual dialectic: thought and reality, which he refers to earlier as "nature" and "mind." If thought is the function of reality, then thought is our nature. And if reality is the body of thought, then reality is our mind. To know reality is to know our mind, and to see our thoughts is to see our nature. But if we stop to think about our thoughts, if we make our thoughts into objects or concepts, we separate them from the reality from which they are born and from which they can be separated in name only. As long as we don't grab hold of "thought" and "reality" and think they actually refer to anything other than our own nature and our mind, we walk the same path Hui-neng walked thirteen hundred years ago. And here where the trail disappears, form asks shadow, "Where to?"

**Deluded people think in terms of objects.** The Tsungpao edition specifies, "deluded people who claim they see their nature."

**Those people who transcend objects and who don't give rise to thoughts, even though they have no thoughts, they do not then proclaim 'no thought.'** This is not present in the Tsungpao edition.

**And 'thought' is thought about the original nature of reality.** This line is also absent in the Tsungpao edition.

**Reality.** The Chinese is *chen-ju*, and the Sanskrit, *bhutatahata*. Usually this is translated as "suchness" or "what

is truly so.” What is truly so are our thoughts. Our thoughts are the function of reality. To see our thoughts is to see our nature. And reality is the body of our thoughts. Hence, to know reality is to know our mind, which is our real body, which is reality itself.

**When your nature gives rise to thought.** After this phrase, the Tsungpao edition inserts this: “It isn’t your eyes, ears, nose, or tongue that can think. It’s because of the nature of reality that thoughts arise. If there was no reality, eyes and ears and sounds and sights would vanish in a flash.”

**The *Vimalakirti Sutra*.** This quote is from Chapter One, but the sutra does not include the words “externally” and “internally.” These are Hui-neng’s additions. They were later deleted in the Tsungpao edition, but they reveal the structural approach Hui-neng is trying to convey to his audience.

**Textual note:** This section appears at the end of Chapter Four in the Tsungpao edition, where it follows the preceding section.

**18. 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 dispassionate.**

**If someone says to contemplate the mind, the mind is basically a delusion. And because 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’s because of deluded thoughts that reality**

is obscured. But once you are free of deluded thoughts, your original nature is pure. If you don't see that your nature is already pure, and you rouse your mind to contemplate purity, you create the delusion of purity instead. A delusion has no actual location, which is how we know what we contemplate is a delusion. And purity has no form. If someone establishes a form for purity and thinks they have achieved something, those who hold such a view separate themselves from their own nature and become trapped by purity instead.

And if someone cultivates dispassion, as long as they don't pay attention to the faults of others, their nature is dispassionate. But deluded people act dispassionate then open their mouths and talk about right and wrong and turn their backs on the Way. Meanwhile, contemplating the mind and contemplating purity are actually what separates them from the Way.

In this section, Hui-neng addresses meditation practices that are harmful, practices that prevent people from understanding the true nature of reality and their own nature. These same practices were later attributed to the Northern School of Zen. Whether or not this was justified or simply amounted to creating a convenient opponent is a moot point. The terms "contemplating the mind," "contemplating purity," and "imperturbability" were, in fact, used by Zen masters affiliated with the Northern School. But how they understood these terms is another matter. Of course, there have always been those who understood them in the way that Hui-neng suggests, even during the Buddha's time. In any case, Hui-neng's point in using them is not to criticize people because of their different styles of teaching but because

of the effectiveness of their methods. And any method that creates new layers of delusion, instead of transforming existing ones, is to be avoided.

**Practice Zen.** The Chinese here is *tso-ch'an*. *Tso* normally means “to sit,” but during the T'ang dynasty this word also meant “to do,” and Hui-neng's use of the term, I think, was meant to be understood in this broader light, as his school does not restrict Zen to the meditation cushion. Hui-neng's Zen is sitting-walking-standing-lying-down Zen, tea-drinking Zen.

**Zen.** When Buddhist meditation was introduced to the Chinese, the Sanskrit term *dhyana* was rendered *zen-na* and later shortened to *zen*. In the beginning, this word simply meant “meditation.” But it was used by the heirs of Bodhidharma to refer to the practice of pointing directly to the mind, and it became the name of their school as well. Nowadays, this term is pronounced *ch'an* in Mandarin Chinese. But Mandarin is the Manchu pronunciation forced upon the Chinese by the founders of the Ch'ing dynasty in the seventeenth century, whereas the pronunciation retained in Japan and in that part of China where Zen began comes much closer to the original pronunciation, which was something like *dzian*. Because *Zen* is closer to the pronunciation of Hui-neng, and because the Japanese version of this teaching is better known in the West, I have used *Zen* throughout this text as well as in my commentary.

**Contemplate.** As elsewhere, I have followed the Tunhuang Museum copy, which has *k'an*: “to look at.” The Tunhuang Cave and later editions have *cho*: “to dwell on” or “focus on,” but elsewhere in this section they, too, have *k'an*.

**Contemplate the mind.** The usual instructions are to watch thoughts rise and fall or to watch them float past the calm lake of our minds. Thus, the actual practice isn't so much contemplating the mind as it is the thoughts that appear and disappear in the mind. Still, the problem with this practice is that it separates thoughts from the mind, when, in fact, thoughts are the mind. As we just learned in the previous section, thoughts are the function of reality. To know this is to know the mind.

**Contemplate purity.** The usual instructions concerning this meditation are to consider the impure nature of all composite things, all things that depend on other things for their existence. In early Buddhism, this often led practitioners to meditate in graveyards or beside corpses or to think of the body as a cesspool of ill. Thus, to contemplate purity requires that we turn our backs on the world in which we live and die. But how can we turn our backs on a delusion?

**The mind is basically a delusion.** With the development of the Mahayana perspective, Buddhist thinkers proposed two kinds of mind to explain the universal potential for buddhahood among universally deluded beings. Basically there is the mind as reality, and there is the mind as delusion. They are one and the same. And although our deluded mind is not separate from our real mind, the deluded mind is where we begin our practice.

**If you don't see that your nature is already pure.** This phrase is missing in the Tsungpao edition.

**Dispassion.** The Chinese here is *pu-tung*: "unmoving." The corresponding Sanskrit term is *akshobhya*: "unshakeable." This

is an attribute of meditation but also of wisdom, in which case it is often understood as being unmoved by the Eight Winds of success and failure, praise and blame, honor and dishonor, pleasure and pain. Imperturbability has always been seen as an attribute of spiritual practice. But improperly understood and practiced, it results in separation from others and the absence of compassion. Thus, it was listed as one of the six attainments of the *arhan*, the exemplar of the Lesser Vehicle of Hinayana Buddhism. And it is probably in this sense that Hui-neng is using this term. In a Northern School document found in the Tunhuang Caves (*Ta-sheng wu-sheng fang-pien-men* and later included in Volume 85 of the Taisho Tripitaka), dispassion is listed as one of the five types of cultivation and equated with wisdom.

**Textual note:** This section appears at the beginning of Chapter Five in the Tsungpao edition.

**19. In that case, what do we mean in this school by ‘to practice Zen’? In this school, by ‘to practice,’ we mean not to be obstructed by anything and externally not to give rise to thoughts about objective states. And by ‘Zen,’ we mean to see our nature without being confused.**

**And what do we mean by ‘Zen meditation’? Externally to be free of form is ‘Zen.’ And internally not to be confused is ‘meditation.’ Externally, if you are attached to form, internally, your mind will be confused. But if you are free of form externally, internally your nature will not be confused.**

**Your nature itself is pure and focused. It is just that you come into contact with objects, and as you come into contact, you become confused. When you are free of form and not confused, you are focused. To be free of form**



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, we return to our original mind.’ And the *Bodhisattva Precept Sutra* says, ‘Our original nature is pure.’ Good friends, see the fundamental purity of your own nature. Cultivate and put to work for yourselves the dharma body of your own nature. Practice for yourselves the practices of a buddha. Begin and complete for yourselves the path to buddhahood.

Like most Chinese Buddhist masters, Hui-neng loves playing with words and breaking them apart to see what falls out. Here, he uses the two most common expressions associated with his approach to liberation: *tso-ch’an*: “practicing Zen” and *ch’an-t’ing*: “Zen meditation.” But instead of examining their etymology or trying to define them in a way that might give us something to hold on to, he uses them to draw us back to the wordless teaching that is the hallmark of Zen. Instead of providing us with a set of rules, “practicing” means no rules: no internal obstructions, no external projections. And instead of providing us with a new idol to worship, “Zen” brings us face-to-face with ourselves. As we cultivate this direct practice, Zen becomes the formless form we know and see and hear within us and around us, the formless form that is us. And meditation is not about sitting just so or breathing just so or focusing our minds just so. Meditation is the mindfulness of an unfettered mind, the mindfulness that enables us to penetrate and transform all areas of our life, not just our time on the meditation cushion, the mindfulness that enables us to practice the practices of a

buddha.

This concludes Hui-neng's opening remarks that began with Section 12 and that cleared the stage of our minds for instruction in the precepts that are the focus of this sermon.

**Not to be obstructed.** The Chinese for this phrase calls to mind the Chinese translations of Kumarajiva and Hsuan-tsang of the *Heart Sutra*: "Bodhisattvas take refuge in Prajnaparamita, and their minds are without obstruction."

**Objective states.** This refers to the results of the process whereby we create the world around us as well as the world within. These worlds are not so much made up of objects as they are constituted by our projections. In what little we know of Shen-hsiu's teaching of meditation, he tells his disciples that this is where they should begin their practice. It was as a result of such an emphasis that his teaching became known as an indirect teaching of stages.

**Meditation.** This is the natural state of our minds in which "form is emptiness and emptiness is form," to quote the *Heart Sutra*. To regain it, Buddhists have developed many methods. However, some of these create a temporary focusing of the mind at the risk of greater distortion by separating the mind from the mind. For Huineng, meditation is mindfulness. And mindfulness is the same as mind-emptiness.

**If you are free of form externally, internally your nature will not be confused.** For this, the Chisung and Tsungpao editions have, "If you are free of form on the outside, your mind won't be confused."

**When you are free of form and not confused, we are focused.** The Tsungpao edition has, “If upon seeing external states, your mind is not confused, this is to be truly focused.”

***Vimalakirti Sutra.*** This quote appears in Chapter Three of that sutra, where Vimalakirti enters into such a powerful meditation that the disciples being taught by Purna suddenly become aware of their former lives. The Tsungpao edition omits this quote.

***Bodhisattva Precept Sutra.*** Although this is also considered a separate sutra, it is actually part of the *Brahma’s Net Sutra* (Fan-wangching). The above quote appears in Chapter Ten of that text, where the Buddha says, “These are the precepts of all beings. From the very beginning their nature is pure.” Thus, the sutra quoted here refers to the nature of the precepts and only indirectly to our buddha nature. I have taken the liberty of changing the pronouns in both sutra passages from third person plural to the second person plural to reflect Hui-neng’s application of these quotes to his audience.

**Good friends.** The Tsungpao edition simplifies the last paragraph: “Good friends, in every thought see the purity of your own nature. Cultivate, carry out, and complete for yourselves the path to buddhahood.”

**Textual note:** This section concludes Chapter Five of the Tsungpao edition, where it follows the preceding section. Chapter Six of the Tsungpao edition then begins with a section which does not appear in either Tunhuang edition but which is clearly meant to introduce the sections that follow: “When the

Master saw people of all classes from Kuangchou and Shaochou gathered together there on the mountain (ed. apparently Tsaohsi Mountain and thus a different assembly and a different occasion) to listen to the Dharma, he ascended the seat and addressed the assembly, 'Come, all you good friends. This is something you must bring forth from your own natures. At all times, thought after thought, purify your own mind. Cultivate yourselves. Do it yourselves. See your own dharma body. See the buddha of your own mind. This will only happen if you save yourselves and obey yourselves. You didn't need to come here. But since you have come from so far away and have gathered together, we all have a connection. Each of you should kneel down. First, I will transmit the five sticks of dharma-body incense of your own nature. Then, I will teach you the formless repentance.'

As everyone knelt, the Master said, 'First is the incense of morality. When your minds are free of wrong, free of evil, free of envy and jealousy, free of greed and anger, free of robbery and malice, this is called the incense of morality.

Second is the incense of meditation. When you see things that are good and evil, and your mind is not upset, this is called the incense of meditation.

Third is the incense of wisdom. When your mind is free of obstructions, and you always contemplate your own nature with wisdom, and you don't commit evils, and even though you perform good deeds, your mind remains detached, and you respect those above you, and you care for those below you, and you sympathize with the orphaned and the destitute, this is called the incense of wisdom.

Fourth is the incense of liberation. When your mind does not cling to anything, and you do not think about good or evil but

are free and unobstructed, this is called the incense of liberation.

Fifth is the incense of the knowledge of liberation. Once your mind does not cling to anything good or evil, you must not submerge yourselves in emptiness or cling to stillness but must study and learn from many sources. When you recognize your own mind, and you master the truths of the buddhas, and you soften your light when you interact with others, and you remain free of self and other, and your true nature doesn't change as you proceed straight to enlightenment, this is called the incense of the knowledge of liberation. Good friends, let these sticks of incense sweeten the air within you. Don't look for them somewhere else.'” At this point, the Tsungpao edition continues not with Section 20 but with Section 22.

**20. Good friends, while I confer on you the Formless Precepts, you must all experience this 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 transformation-body buddha in my own material body.**

**I take refuge in the future and perfect realization-body buddha in my own material body.’**

**Now recite this three times.**

**This material body is an inn and not a fit refuge. But the three bodies I just mentioned are your ever-present 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, and I will tell you good friends how to see within your material body the three-bodied buddha present in your dharma nature, the three-bodied buddha that arises from this nature of yours.**

In Sections 12-19, Hui-neng instructed us in his basic approach to meditation and wisdom. In Sections 20-23, he introduces us to the third member of the Three Pillars of Buddhism: the precepts that govern practice. And he begins with taking refuge in the Three Treasures: the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha, the teacher, the teaching, and the community of those taught. However, instead of the traditional formulation, which directs us to put our trust in the historical figure of Shakyamuni, in the sutras in the Buddhist Canon, and in the teachers and fellow practitioners of the Buddhist community, Hui-neng tells us to look no further than ourselves. This is because the only Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha worth taking refuge in are all present within ourselves. The Three Treasures in which we take refuge are the three bodies of every buddha, and all three are right here in our own material body and in this very thought.

**Three-bodied buddha.** The body of reality is also called our dharma body. This is the Dharma in which we take refuge. The actual experience of this is our realization body. This is the Buddha in which we take refuge. And the manifestation of this body in our thoughts, words, and deeds is our transformation body. This is the Sangha in which we take refuge.

**The future and perfect.** I've followed the Tunhuang Cave copy for this phrase. The Tunhuang Museum copy replaces *lai*: "to come" with *shen*: "body." The Tsungpao edition deletes the whole phrase *dang-lai*: "future," probably in the interests of keeping the number of characters (and thus syllables) in each line the same.

**Dharma nature.** This is another name for our own nature but also another name for the dharma body or for reality itself. The Chinese is *fa-hsing*, and the Sanskrit equivalent is *dharmata*. The Tsungpao edition deletes *fa*: "dharma" from this phrase wherever it occurs in this section. Apparently, having two phrases (*tzu-hsing*: "your own nature" and *fa-hsing*: "dharma nature") referring to the same thing was too much for the editors of the Tsungpao edition.

**What do we mean by the pure dharma-body buddha?** Good friends, everyone's nature is fundamentally pure, and the ten thousand dharmas are present in this nature. If we think about doing something bad, we commit bad deeds. And if we think about doing something good, we perform good deeds. Thus, we know all dharmas are present in our nature. But our nature itself remains pure. The sun and moon are always shining. It is only due to cloud cover that there is light above but darkness below and we can't see the sun or moon or stars. Then suddenly the wind of wisdom comes along and blows the clouds and drives the fog away, and a panorama of ten thousand images appears all at once.

Our nature is pure like the clear sky above, and our wisdom is like the sun and the moon, our wisdom is always shining. But if externally we become attached to objects,

the clouds of delusion cover up our nature, and we can't see it. Then, because we meet a good friend who explains the true teaching, our delusions are blown away and everything inside and outside becomes perfectly clear, and the ten thousand dharmas in this nature of ours all appear. This nature of ours in which the ten thousand dharmas are present is what we mean by the pure dharma body. Those of you who take refuge in yourselves, if you get rid of bad thoughts and bad practices, this is called taking refuge.

This nature of ours is the source of all dharmas, all thoughts, even all objects. But we turn this cornucopia of magic into a quagmire of delusion when we separate ourselves from dharmas and thoughts and objects, and dharmas from dharmas, and thoughts from thoughts, and objects from objects. Thus, Hui-neng urges us to take refuge in this triple-bodied nature of ours and in the ten thousand realities that arise from it and that lead us back to our nature because they are our nature.

**Ten thousand dharmas.** This expression is somewhat different from the standard Chinese *wan-fa*: “ten thousand things,” which the Chinese traditionally used to refer to the world of material objects. As used by Buddhists, *wan-fa* refers to the myriad realities that our minds make possible. Thus, *fa* can mean “object” but usually means “thought” or “concept,” something created and grasped by the mind, a piece of reality, or even reality itself. Thus, it can be positive or negative, depending on the context. Hui-neng uses it in a positive sense and simply to refer to the never-ending river of thoughts that arise from and that constitute our minds.



**Ten thousand dharmas are present in this nature.** The Tsungpao edition has: “Ten thousand dharmas are produced from our nature.”

**Our nature itself remains pure.** In the Tsungpao edition, this is replaced by: “It is always clear like the sky.”

**We can’t see the sun or moon or stars.** This is absent in the Tsung-pao edition.

**Our nature is pure like the clear sky above.** In place of this, the Tsungpao edition has: “Our nature is always adrift, like the clouds in the sky.”

**Those of you who take refuge in yourselves, if you get rid of bad thoughts and bad practices, this is called taking refuge.** In place of this line, the Tsungpao edition has this: “Good friends, with your own minds take refuge in your own nature. This is to take refuge in the true buddha. Those who take refuge in themselves should eliminate from their nature all bad thoughts, jealous thoughts, deceitful thoughts, selfish thoughts, crazy thoughts, belittling thoughts, arrogant thoughts, erroneous thoughts, self-important thoughts, and all bad practices that might occur. Always to see your own faults and not to talk about the good or bad of others, this is to take refuge in yourself. Always be humble and treat everyone with respect. When you see your nature in its entirety, and you are no longer obstructed, this is to take refuge in yourself.”

**What do we mean by the myriadfold transformation body? If we didn’t think, our nature would be utterly**

empty. When we think, we transform ourselves. If we think evil thoughts, we turn into the denizens of hell. If we think good thoughts, we turn into the deities of heaven. Malice turns us into beasts. Compassion turns us into bodhisattvas. Wisdom transports us to the higher realms, and ignorance sends us into the lower depths. Our nature is constantly transforming itself. But deluded people are unaware of this.

Once we think of goodness, wisdom arises. One lamp can dispel a thousand years of darkness, and one thought of wisdom can end ten thousand years of ignorance. Don't think about what's past. Keep thinking about what's next. When your next thought is always good, this 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. In the face of impermanence, if your next thought is good, this is what we call the realization body.

The thoughts that come from the dharma body are your transformation body. And when every thought is good, this is your realization body. When you yourself become aware of this, and when you yourself cultivate this, this is called taking refuge. Your material body is made of flesh and bones. Your material body is but an inn and not a fit place of refuge. Just become aware of your three bodies, and you will understand what is truly important.

In as simple a manner as possible, Hui-neng reveals his insight into the most profound mystery, the mystery of our ever-changing-always-present thoughts. This is what we take refuge

in, not in a statue on an altar or the memory of someone who died centuries ago or some mythic ideal, but in the thought-bodies present in our own material body. In fact, our material body is part of all three of these bodies. Our thoughts arise, it turns out, from our dharma body, including the thought that we have a material body. And as they arise, they become our transformation body. And when every thought is good, they form our realization body. The three bodies of every buddha turn out to be nothing more or less than these very thoughts of ours. The ocean and its waves turn out to be one and the same body of water. So why not dive in and swim with the dharma fishes?

**What do we mean by the myriadfold transformation body?**

The Tsungpao edition inverts the order of this and the next paragraph and at the end of this paragraph has this: “If you always think bad thoughts, you will always commit bad deeds. But one thought of goodness, and wisdom arises. This is called the transformation-body buddha of your nature.”

**Keep thinking about what’s next.** After this phrase, the Tsungpao edition completes this paragraph with this: “When every thought is perfectly clear, you will see your nature. Although good and bad thoughts differ, their natures aren’t separate. The nature that isn’t separate is called your true nature. In this true nature, good and bad thoughts have no effect. This is called your perfect realization-body buddha.”

**The thoughts that come from the dharma body.** The Tsungpao edition rewrites this last paragraph and reinterprets Hui-neng’s understanding of the relationship among the three

bodies: “Good friends, the dharma body is essentially complete. To witness our nature thought after thought is the realization-body buddha. And the thoughts that come from the realization body are the transformation-body buddha.” Although this is a traditional statement of the relationship, it doesn’t agree with Hui-neng’s account in either Tunhuang copy.

**Textual note:** This section appears in the middle of Chapter Six of the Tsungpao edition, where it follows Section 23.

**21. Good friends, having taken refuge in the three-bodied buddha, let us now make Four Boundless Vows. Good friends, recite after me:**

**‘I vow to save 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 attain buddhahood, no matter how  
transcendent.’**

**Now recite this three times.**

**Good friends, as for ‘I vow to save all beings, no matter how numberless,’ it isn’t Hui-neng who does the saving. Good friends, every being you can think of saves themselves with their own nature in their own bodies.**

**What does it mean ‘they save themselves with their own nature’? The wrong views and afflictions, the ignorance and delusions in their own material bodies already possess the nature of original enlightenment. It is just this nature of original enlightenment that saves them with right views. Once they realize the prajna wisdom of right views, they dispel their ignorance and delusion, and**

**each being saves themselves. The false are saved with truth. The deluded are saved with awareness. The ignorant are saved with wisdom. The bad are saved with goodness. And the afflicted are saved with enlightenment. Those who are saved like this are truly saved.**

**As for ‘I vow to end all afflictions, no matter how countless,’ this means to get rid of the delusions of your own mind. And ‘I vow to master all teachings, no matter how limitless’ means to study the true, unexcelled Dharma. And ‘I vow to attain buddhahood, no matter how transcendent’ means always to practice with humility, to respect all beings, to avoid attachments, to give rise to prajna from your own awareness, and to put an end to delusions. It is through self-realization that buddhahood is attained. This is the power of making vows.**

Buddhists throughout the world chant these four vows every day to remind themselves of their commitment to follow the same path all buddhas follow. Having taken refuge in ourselves, we need something to motivate our practice. This is where the power of vows comes in. We make vows when faced with a difficult task or when something is dear to our hearts. The union of marriage is based upon the exchange of vows. Making a vow has much more powerful consequences than simply deciding to do something or not do something. Pilgrims in China often place keyless locks on the chains that line the trail up a sacred mountain, as a testament to some vow they have made, with the idea that the lock will rust away before they break their vow. We put our whole heart into our vows. Buddhists put their hearts into these four, which are directly related to the four bodies mentioned in the previous section.

By vowing to save all beings, we create the same realization body created by all buddhas. By vowing to end all afflictions, we end our attachment to our material body, just as all buddhas have freed themselves of theirs. By vowing to master all teachings, we produce the transformation body, just as all buddhas have done in their effort to transmit this teaching to others. And by vowing to attain buddhahood, we end our separation from our dharma body, which is the original nature of all beings, not only of buddhas.

**Numberless.** Although Hui-neng uses the term *wu-pien*: “limitless” in the first three of the bodhisattva vows, the traditional wording, both in Chinese and Sanskrit, has “limitless,” “endless,” and “measureless,” for which I have substituted my own synonyms.

**Original enlightenment.** This term was apparently coined by Ashvaghosha, the author of *Awakening of Faith in the Mahayana*, where he contrasts it with initial enlightenment. Initial enlightenment arises from our practice and eventually reunites us with our original enlightenment, from which we are never separate, though we might remain unaware of it for countless lifetimes.

**It is just this nature of original enlightenment.** This phrase is missing in the Tunhuang Cave copy but is present in the Tunhuang Museum copy. Without it, the connections here are unclear.

**Right views.** This term is placed at the beginning of the Buddha’s Eightfold Noble Path and refers to the ability to see things as they really are. For Hui-neng, and the Zen sect

generally, this is the first and the last step on the path. Once we see things as they really are, as “no-things,” as lacking any attribute or characteristic that separates them from anything else, we wear the same enlightenment on our shoulders that all buddhas wear. Buddhas are simply those beings who see things as they really are.

**Textual note:** This section appears in Chapter Six of the Tsungpao edition, where it follows, rather than precedes, the next section. There are not a lot of major issues here, but those that exist show how later editors tried to smooth out problematic phrasing. For example, in the Tsungpao edition, “in our own (material) body” is omitted. Also, for reasons I can’t fathom, so is “original enlightenment.” Finally, the second and third vows in the final paragraph are given a few more phrases of explanation.

**22. Good friends, having made the Four Boundless Vows, let me now recite for you the Formless Repentances that destroy your 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 my bad practices of the past all be gone  
and 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 my deceitful thoughts of the past be gone  
and may they never occur again,  
such is the repentance of my nature.**

**May past, present, and future thoughts  
may thought after thought not be corrupted by envy  
may my envious thoughts of the past be gone  
and 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 misdeeds and not to commit them again for the rest of your life. Unless bad practices are forever removed from your mind, reciting this before buddhas won't help you. In this Dharma teaching of mine, repentance means to stop once and for all.**

Unless we free ourselves of the past, we can never free ourselves of the future. And unless we free ourselves of the future, we can never free ourselves of the present. And buddhas need to be free. The bad karma of our past misdeeds, the seeds of which we have sown over many lifetimes, restricts the way we deal with our lives as well as with the world in which we live and prevents us from carrying out our vows to save all beings, to put an end to all afflictions, to master all teachings, and to attain buddhahood. In order to fulfill these vows, we need the benefit of good karma, and we need to put an end to bad karma. This is where repentance comes in. But repentance can only work if it is based on right views. Hence, as he does elsewhere, Hui-



neng avoids traditional formulations of what we should repent and focuses on the heart of the Buddha's teaching, which is also the heart of repentance: delusion and ignorance. And because people who follow a spiritual path are still prone to compete with others for spiritual attainments, he adds envy.

**Delusion . . . Ignorance.** Buddhists distinguish ignorance as the absence of knowledge and delusion as the presence of false knowledge.

**Such is the repentance of my nature.** One would expect this line to repeat the lines that conclude the first and last stanzas. However, all the editions I've consulted agree with this wording.

**Now recite this three times.** My rendering of the above recitation is based on reading these as a series of seven-character lines.

**Reciting this before buddhas.** This refers to the performance of this recitation at home or in a shrine hall before a buddha statue.

**Textual note:** This section appears in Chapter Six of the Tsungpao edition, where it precedes, rather than follows, the previous section. The Tsungpao edition has also edited this section considerably but has removed much of what was unique to Hui-neng's mode of expression. For example, it has omitted "from my nature," which is the only feature that separates Hui-neng's "formless" repentance from traditional expressions. However, I have followed the Chisung and Tsungpao editions here in reading *chi-tu*: "envy" in place of *chu-chi*: "ulcer-hate,"

which is either a local expression, for which I can find no other occurrence, or a mistake. Also, in the last paragraph, the Huihsin, Chisung, and Tsungpao editions have a longer list of misdeeds to be repented: delusion, ignorance, arrogance, dishonesty, jealousy, and envy.

**23. Good friends, now that we have finished with repentance, I will transmit to you the Formless Precepts of the Triple Refuge.”**

**The Master said, “Good friends,**

**‘We take refuge in enlightenment  
and the best of two-legged creatures.**

**We take refuge in truth  
and the best of what transcends desire.**

**We 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. And may you experience 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 whose delusions do not arise, who have few desires and who know contentment, who are free from wealth and sex, they are called the ‘best of two-legged creatures.’**

**Take refuge in the truth of your own minds. When your thoughts are free from delusion, you are therefore free**

**from attachment. And freedom from attachment is called 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, because your nature remains uncorrupted, this is called the ‘best of congregations.’**

**Ordinary people don’t understand this. Day after day, they recite 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 false.**

**Good friends, each of you should examine this for yourselves. Don’t misdirect your attention. The sutras only say to take refuge in the buddha of yourselves. They don’t say to take refuge in some other buddha. If you don’t take refuge in your own nature, there’s no other place of refuge.**

Through repentance, we wipe our karmic slate clean of attachments and delusions and are now ready to set forth on the bodhisattva path. The bodhisattva path of Mahayana Buddhism differs from the shravaka path of Hinayana Buddhism in that shravakas seek nirvana, while bodhisattvas seek enlightenment. By attaining nirvana, shravakas put an end to passion and rebirth. But by attaining enlightenment, bodhisattvas are able to liberate themselves and others as well. Thus, Hui-neng leads his audience to take refuge in enlightenment: in the realization of enlightenment, in enlightenment itself, and in the manifestation of enlightenment. These are the Three Treasures of our own nature. They are the true jewels among the rhinestones and synthetic

gems of our minds. We all have them. But we need to look for them. And looking for them outside ourselves is a waste of time.

This section concludes Hui-neng's transmission of the Formless Precepts, which was one of the two reasons for this assembly, the other being an explanation of the teaching of Prajnaparamita on which the Formless Precepts are based and which follows.

**Enlightenment.** The realization of enlightenment is called the *sanbogha-kaya*, or body of realization.

**Two-legged.** This also refers to the "legs" of wisdom and virtue on which a buddha stands and walks.

**Truth.** Enlightenment itself is the *dharma-kaya*, or body of reality.

**Purity.** The manifestation of enlightenment is the *nirmana-kaya*, or body of transformation.

**Beginning today . . . your own Three Treasures.** This entire paragraph is a restatement of the Three Treasures: the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha.

**May you experience the compassion of your own Three Treasures.** In the Tsungpao edition, this line reads: "You should experience this yourselves with the Three Treasures of your own nature."

**Of your own nature.** The Tunhuang Cave copy omits this expression. However, it is present in the Tunhuang Museum copy.

**You are therefore free from attachment.** In place of this, the Tsung-pao edition has: “They are free from attachment, and being free from attachment, they are free from egotism, arrogance, greed, and attachment.”

**Are present in your nature.** This is absent in the Tsungpao edition.

**The sutras only say.** Hui-neng must have in mind the *Avatamsaka Sutra* (11), in which the audience is urged to “take refuge in the Buddha yourselves.” But as he does elsewhere, Hui-neng bends this to his own purpose and hears “take refuge in the buddha of yourselves.”

**Some other buddha.** It was for this reason that some Zen masters advised their disciples, “When you meet the Buddha, kill the Buddha.” While it can be greatly beneficial to meet a buddha, or any good friend who helps us on the path, a buddha cannot transfer his or her enlightenment to us. We have to realize it for ourselves.

**If you don’t take refuge in your own nature.** The Tsungpao edition has: “If you don’t take refuge in your own buddha.”

**Textual note:** This section appears in Chapter Six of the Tsungpao edition, where it follows Section 21 but precedes Section 20. At the end of this section, the Tsungpao edition adds: “Having become aware of this yourselves, each of you must take refuge in the Three Treasures of your own mind. Internally, control your mind, externally respect others. This is how you take refuge in yourselves.”

**24. Good friends, now that you have finished taking refuge in the Three Treasures, each of you should clear your mind, and I will convey 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 mouth. If you chant it with your mouth but don’t practice it, it’s like an illusion or a mirage. But 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 so great, it’s like space. But if you practice Empty-mind Zen, you will fall into a featureless void. In this world of ours, space 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, heavens and hells. All of this exists in space. The emptiness of our nature is also like this.**

Now that his audience has received the Formless Precepts and taken refuge in the Three Treasures, Hui-neng explains the teaching from which all of this developed, and on which Mahayana Buddhism is founded. Depending on how one understands the Sanskrit word *yana*, the Mahayana is the Great Path or the Great Vehicle. And what is “great” is the mind. The “path” or “vehicle” represents the realization and manifestation

of the mind, which is our buddha nature. And this nature, which is not only our nature but the nature of all beings and all things, is defined or characterized by “emptiness.” But according to the Mahayana, “emptiness” is not a negation, but rather an affirmation, an affirmation of our ineffable unity with all beings and all things. Thus, Hui-neng likens this nature of ours to space, because it embraces all things. What could be greater?

**You may have chanted this.** Hui-neng is referring to the recitation that preceded this talk and that probably consisted of the gatha that ends the *Heart* or the *Diamond Sutra* and which encapsulates the teaching of Mahaprajnaparamita. (Given the language here urging us to overcome illusion and mirage, I would guess the gatha chanted was the one that ends the *Diamond Sutra*:

“All created things  
are like a dream, an illusion, a bubble, a shadow  
like dew or like lightning  
view everything like this.”

Then too Hui-neng had a special connection with the *Diamond Sutra*.)

**This teaching must be practiced.** The Huihsin, Chisung, and Tsung-pao editions have: “This must be practiced with the mind, and not simply chanted with the mouth. If the mouth chants it, but the mind doesn’t practice it, it’s like an illusion, like a mirage, like dew, or like lightning. (ed. This series of similes is from the *Diamond Sutra*.) But when the mouth chants it, and the mind practices it, the mouth and the mind are in harmony. Your original nature is the Buddha. Apart from this nature there is no other buddha.”

**The capacity of the mind is so great, it's like space.** After this line, the Tsungpao edition continues: "It has no borders, it is neither round nor square, neither great nor small, neither blue, yellow, red, nor white, it has no up or down, long or short, it has no anger or joy, no right or wrong, no good or bad, no head or tail. All buddhalands share this space. Our mysterious nature is originally empty, devoid of any perceivable dharma. The true emptiness of our nature is also like this. Good friends, don't listen to me talk about emptiness then become attached to emptiness. Most important of all, don't become attached to emptiness. But if you practice Empty-mind Zen . . . "

**But if you practice Empty-mind Zen.** The Huihsin edition has: "If you *ching-tso*: 'sit quietly' with an empty mind." The Tunhuang Cave edition (as amended by Suzuki) has "If you *tso*: 'sit' with an empty mind." As elsewhere, I've followed the Tunhuang Museum edition.

**Textual note:** This section appears near the beginning of Chapter Two in the Tsungpao edition, where it follows Section 12.

**25. Our nature contains the ten thousand dharmas. That's how great it is. And the ten thousand dharmas are our nature. To see humans and non-humans, both the good and the bad, good dharmas and bad dharmas, without rejecting them and without being corrupted by them, this is to be like space. This is what we mean by 'great.' This is what *maha* means.**



**Deluded people chant this with their mouths, the wise practice it with their minds. There are also deluded people who call having an empty mind and not thinking ‘great.’ But that isn’t how this works. The capacity of the mind is great, but if you don’t use it, it’s small. If you merely talk about emptiness with your mouth, but you don’t practice this practice, you’re no disciple of mine.**

The emptiness of our nature contains the ten thousand realities we give names to. But all of these realities (dharma) are not only in our nature, they are our nature. In the *Heart Sutra*, Avalokiteshvara looks upon the reality of the mind and says that the Five Skandhas, into which early Buddhists divided the mind, are emptiness, and emptiness is the Five Skandhas. As far as Avalokiteshvara could see, no matter how we divide the mind, there is nothing but emptiness. This is the true nature of all dharma, and thus, it is the true nature of our mind, which gives rise to all dharma. And being the true nature of our mind, this emptiness has no limits. Thus, it is great. But its greatness can only be realized in the exercise of our minds. Thus, it can also be small. It all depends on us.

**Ten thousand dharma.** The term *wan-fa* was used by Chinese Buddhists as an equivalent to *wan-wu*: “ten thousand things” in order to emphasize that their understanding of reality was not of a physical world but one made of mind. Thus, the word *fa*: “dharma” not only includes what we think of as “things” but also concepts and teachings, anything we think of as real.

**And the ten thousand dharma are our nature.** The editors

of the Tsungpao edition apparently had a problem with this line and changed this to: “and the ten thousand things are in our nature,” which not only repeats the thrust of the first sentence but also backs away from voicing what became a major teaching of Zen in China: “the yellow flowers and the green bamboo, these are also the realm of reality.”

**But that isn't how this works.** Between this line and “the capacity of the mind is great,” the Tsungpao edition inserts the following lines: “Good friends, the capacity of the mind is great. It encompasses the realm of reality. When we use it, everything is clear. And whatever we use it in response to, we know. The all becomes one. The one becomes all. When we move freely, and our mind is without obstruction, this is prajna. Good friends, all prajna wisdom rises from our nature and doesn't come from outside. Don't misdirect your attention. This is called the self-functioning of our true nature. When one thing is true, everything is true. The mind's capacity is great, but if you don't use it . . . ”

**Talk about emptiness.** Talking about emptiness has always posed a problem for Mahayana Buddhists. It is the central concept of Mahayana Buddhism, but it is also its most misunderstood concept. This was true in ancient India, where Mahayana pundits struggled to make clear the meaning of *shunyata*, and it was also true in China, where Zen masters struggled to do the same with *k'ung*, and it is now true in the West, where we continue to shipwreck on the shoals of “emptiness.”

I suppose every teacher and every student have their own map for sailing through the Straits of Shunyata. I like to look at it this way: “Emptiness” appears to be a negation, and it is. But it's

a double-negation. It's a negation of a negation. The negation that it negates is the assertion of self-existence. When we assert the existence of something, whether in time or space or in our minds, we separate it from reality. We confer on it self-existence, which is a delusion. Its self-existence only exists in our minds. Its true nature is its oneness with reality. Our assertion of self-existence is thus a negation.

What "emptiness" does is to negate this negation. Emptiness means "empty of self-existence," which is how Avalokiteshvara defines it in the *Heart Sutra*. So the question arises, if that's all emptiness means, a double-negation, why don't Buddhists use a more positive word, one less given to misconception? Actually, they do. For example, Chao-chou told his disciples, "Go have some tea." What could be more positive than a cup of tea? Or would you prefer the old poke in the ribs? Buddhists have long realized that to attempt anything more would be to create a whole new set of problems, problems of attachment to some kind of "oneness." Hence, about as close as they ever get to a substitute for "emptiness" is the expression "not two" or "non-duality." Of course, this was not Hui-neng's way. He was not interested in conceptual games.

**Textual note:** This section appears in Chapter Two of the Tsungpao edition, where it follows the preceding section.

**26. What does *prajna* mean? *Prajna* means 'wisdom.' At all times to keep your thoughts free of ignorance and always to practice wisdom, this is what we mean by the practice of *prajna*. One thought of ignorance, and *prajna* stops. One thought of wisdom, and *prajna* reappears. A**

person whose mind is full of ignorance says ‘I’m practicing prajna.’ But prajna has no form. It’s 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 birth and death. When we are attached to objects, we give rise to birth and death, like when waves form on the water. This is what we mean by ‘this shore.’ When we are free of objects, there is no birth or death, like when a river flows on forever. So we say this ‘leads to the other shore.’ This is what we mean by *paramita*.

Deluded people chant this with their mouths. The wise practice it with their minds. If delusions are present when you chant, because delusions are present, it doesn’t really exist. But if you practice when you chant, then it really exists.

Those who realize this teaching realize the teaching of prajna and practice the practice of prajna. Those who don’t practice it are fools. But if they did 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 deluded and a fool. The next moment you’re awake and a buddha.

Good friends, Maha Prajnaparamita is the noblest, the highest, the ultimate. It isn’t present, it isn’t past, and it isn’t 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 and passions of the Five Skandhas.

As the noblest, the highest, and the ultimate, so should you praise this teaching of the Supreme Vehicle. Those

**who practice it are certain to become buddhas. But it is neither present, nor past, nor future. It's the same as meditation and wisdom, and it isn't affected by any dharma. The buddhas of the past, the present, and the future all come from it and thereby transform the Three Poisons into morality, meditation, and wisdom.**

Prajna doesn't mean to get rid of thoughts, just to keep thoughts free of ignorance. Is that asking so much? If we can just do that, then every thought becomes a thought of wisdom, a thought of things as no-things, a thought as no-thought. Thus, in the practice of prajna, every affliction becomes a door to enlightenment. In fact, the nature of affliction and enlightenment are not different. But unless we practice prajna, affliction is affliction, and enlightenment is enlightenment, and the two are worlds apart.

The word *Prajnaparamita* goes back more than two thousand years to the first Mahayana Buddhists, who combined *prajna* with *paramita* to distinguish their formless form of prajna from all other forms of prajna. Depending on how we parse it, *paramita* means "perfection," or it means "transcendent," "what leads to the other shore." This formless form of prajna is the perfection of wisdom, wisdom that transcends the realms of mundane objects and metaphysical dharmas. The realm of *Prajnaparamita* is pervaded by emptiness instead.

Thus, *Prajnaparamita* is also viewed as a goddess from whose womb of emptiness all enlightened beings come forth. This is because it is through the practice of this formless wisdom that buddhas become buddhas. Prajna not only gives birth to buddhas, prajna is what buddhas are made of. It's another name

for our buddha nature. Prajna is the nature of wisdom, and wisdom is the nature of prajna. Prajna gives birth to prajna. This is the ancient lineage to which all buddhas belong.

**I'm practicing prajna.** After this statement, the Tsungpao edition adds: "They speak about emptiness thought after thought, but they don't recognize true emptiness."

**It's the nature of wisdom.** The Tsungpao edition has *hsin*: "mind" for *hsing*: "nature." Also, the Tsungpao edition follows this with: "If someone has such an understanding, this is called prajna wisdom."

**Really exists.** The Tsungpao edition has *chen-hsing*: "true nature."

**Dharma body.** To practice prajna is to put the dharma body into action. The Chisung and Tsungpao editions change dharma body (*dharma-kaya*) to *tzu-shen*: "your own body." Either way, we put our nature into action.

**Affliction is enlightenment.** The Tsungpao edition prefaces this with: "fools are buddhas." According to the "Sutra Explaining the Non-Activity of All Dharmas" (*Sarva-dharma-apravritti-nirdesha-sutra*), "The true nature of desire is the nature of the Dharma. The true nature of the Dharma is the nature of desire. . . . Desire and enlightenment are one and not two."

**The next moment.** After "the next moment you're awake, and you're a buddha," the Tsungpao edition continues: "When past

thoughts are attached to external states, they are afflictions. When future thoughts transcend external states, they are enlightenment.”

**Five Skandhas.** This was one of the most common divisions of our awareness into a conceptual scheme that made it easier for early Buddhists to search for a self: form, sensation, perception, memory, and consciousness. Similar schemes included the Twelve Locations of Sensation, the Eighteen Elements of Perception, the Twelve Links of Dependent Origination, and the Four Truths, all different ways to divide the same pie of the mind.

**Three Poisons.** These include delusion, greed, and anger: our misperception of reality along with our positive and negative reactions to such misperception. Those who practice the paramita of prajna transform delusion into wisdom, greed into morality, and anger into meditation.

**Textual note:** This section appears in Chapter Two of the Tsungpao edition, where it follows the preceding section.

**27. Good friends, this Dharma teaching of mine produces eighty-four thousand kinds of wisdom from one kind of prajna. And how so? Because people have eighty-four thousand passions. If they didn't have any passions, prajna would be ever-present and inseparable from their nature.**

Those who realize this teaching do so through ‘no-thought,’ ‘no-memory,’ and ‘no-attachment.’ Don’t create a

**bunch of delusions.**

**You yourself are the nature of suchness. View all dharmas with wisdom. Neither grasp nor reject them. This is the way to see your nature and become a buddha.**

There is a different kind of wisdom for every passion, just as there is a different medication for every illness. But these countless forms of wisdom all originate in the one formless wisdom of our buddha nature, which manifests itself in no-thought, no-memory, and no-attachment. Meanwhile, those who fail to practice this teaching suffer the poisons of greed, anger, and delusion in the form of eighty-four thousand passions. And yet for each of these countless passions, there is a cure. And the cure is homeopathic: not just the hair of the dog, but the buddha nature of the whole dog.

**Eighty-four thousand.** This was a number used in ancient India to represent what was beyond enumeration. The Chinese used “ten thousand” for the same purpose.

**‘No thought,’ ‘no memory,’ and ‘no attachment.’** No thought of the future, no memory of the past, no attachment to the present. No thought of the future transforms the poison of greed into morality. No memory of the past transforms the poison of anger into meditation. No attachment to the present transforms the poison of delusion into wisdom.

**Don’t create a bunch of delusions.** By *tsa-huang*: “a bunch of delusions,” Hui-neng means the eighty-four thousand passions that make up our thoughts of the future, memories of the past, and attachments to the present. The Tunhuang Cave edition and



the Tsungpao edition have *k'uang-huang*: “wild delusions.”

**You yourself are the nature of suchness.** Suchness is another name for reality, and reality, Hui-neng told us in Section 17, is the body of our thoughts, while our thoughts are its function. No thought is more or less real than any other thought. But when we separate our thoughts and ourselves from our thoughts by trying to grasp them or reject them, we separate ourselves from reality and create the fiction of transient existence, both for our thoughts and ourselves. The Tsungpao edition has *yung-tzu-chen-ju-hsing*: “use your own nature of suchness.”

**Textual note:** This section appears in Chapter Two of the Tsungpao edition, where it follows the preceding section.

**28. Good friends, if you wish to enter the dharma realm of the deep mind, the samadhi of prajna, you only need to practice the practice of Prajnaparamita. By merely memorizing 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 it is praised in detail 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 a lesser capacity hear this teaching, they fail to develop any faith in it. And why not? It's like when the great dragon sends down a heavy rain, and it rains on Jambudvipa until its towns and villages are all swept away like leaves in a stream. But if the same rain falls on the ocean, it isn't affected.

**When those who follow the Mahayana hear about the *Diamond Sutra*, their minds expand with understanding. Thus, our original nature already possesses the wisdom of prajna. And when we use this wisdom to view things, we don't depend on words. It's like the rain, which doesn't originally come from the heavens but from the dragon king, who draws this water from the rivers and seas then uses it to nourish every being and plant, both the sentient and non-sentient. And the 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.**

In the *Diamond Sutra*, the Buddha explains that when we vow to liberate all beings, and we do so without attachment to ourselves, to beings, or to liberation, we create a body of merit equivalent to the body of realization (*sanboghha-kaya*) of every buddha. And it is through the production of such merit that we see our nature and become buddhas.

In his own commentary to the *Diamond Sutra*, Hui-neng has this to say: "All the merit from worshipping as many buddhas as there are grains of sand in the Ganges, from offering enough jewels to fill the billion worlds of the universe, and from renouncing as many bodies as there are specks of dust does not equal the merit from upholding this sutra." (16) And earlier in the same text, he says, "Once a person keeps this sutra in mind, the concepts of self and being suddenly disappear, illusions vanish, and all at once one becomes a buddha." (13)

People who have not experienced this for themselves have no faith in such practice. Its claims sound impossible, too vast to comprehend, much less realize. But those who cultivate this

teaching discover that every drop of water reflects the entire sky, every thought is a door to enlightenment and leads back to our original nature. But to see this depends on the transformative power of prajna.

**Dharma realm.** This is a Buddhist term that refers to the universe, but the universe as composed of dharmas rather than material objects. But since all dharmas are generated by the mind, the dharma realm is also equivalent to the mind, which is here called *shen*: “deep.” It is deep because it includes the entire realm of dharmas, not just one thought but all possible thoughts. I have followed Yang Zengwen in adding the word *hsin*: “mind” here. It is not present in either Tunhuang edition, but it seems called for.

**Samadhi of prajna.** As elsewhere, Hui-neng uses the word *san-wei*: “samadhi” to refer to the mind without a subject or an object.

**Only need to . . . By merely.** The Tsungpao edition omits both “only” and “merely.”

**Memorizing.** Both in India and in China, the memorization of Buddhist texts played a major part in religious training, as well as transmission, and some monks were known for specializing in the memorization of either the *vinaya* (monastic code) or the sutras.

**Such a person’s merit.** The Tsungpao edition reads “sutra” in place of “person.”

**Praised in detail in the sutra.** In the *Diamond Sutra* (16), the

Buddha tells Subhuti the merit that accrues to a person from memorizing or reciting this sutra exceeds his own merit “by an amount that cannot be measured, calculated, illustrated, characterized, or even imagined.”

**Jambudvipa.** According to the Buddhist understanding of the world, which differs only slightly from accounts found in such Brahmanic texts as the *Mahabharata*, the central mountain of the world (Sumeru) is surrounded by a series of seas and intervening mountain ranges and finally a set of continents, of which Jambudvipa is equivalent to the subcontinent of India.

**Dragon king.** The association of dragons with control over clouds and rain was a common belief in most Asian cultures. Among Buddhists, dragons were also said to be in charge of protecting the Prajnaparamita teachings. And it was in the dragon kingdom beneath the sea that Nagarjuna (whose name means “noblest of dragons”) received these teachings and brought them back to the human world in the second half of the second century A.D.

**Textual note:** This section appears in Chapter Two of the Tsungpao edition, where it follows the preceding section.

**29. When people of small capacity hear this direct teaching, they're like the plants in the ground that have shallow roots. If they should ever get drenched by a heavy rain, they're quickly uprooted, or they don't grow very tall. People of small capacity are also like this. But 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's because their barriers of mistaken views are so thick, and their roots of passion are so deep. It's like when heavy clouds cover the sun. Unless the wind blows them away, the sun can't shine through.

It isn't the wisdom of prajna that's great or small. It's because all these beings have deluded themselves into looking for a buddha through external practices and haven't yet realized their own nature that they remain people of small capacity. And yet, on hearing this direct teaching, if they depend not on external practices but simply on their own minds and they let their own nature give rise to right views, even all these beings with their mistaken views, their passions, and their 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 dwell on the inside or the outside. They will come and go freely and be able to get rid of attachments and penetrate everything without restriction. The mind that cultivates such a practice is basically no different from the *Prajnaparamita Sutra*.

Hui-neng likens this direct teaching to a great rain because people whose roots of wisdom are shallow are easily confused or their understanding overwhelmed. Then he attributes our inability to understand this teaching to our roots again. Only this time it's not our roots of wisdom, but our roots of passion. And these are too deep instead of too shallow. Some people might prefer a more consistent handling of metaphors, but Hui-neng just tosses in whatever comes to mind. Don't be misled. They're only metaphors. See your nature. Follow your own thoughts back to their source. Don't let Hui-neng talk you out of it. This

is something anyone can do. Once you see a glimmer of light, you know there's a sun on the other side of those clouds.

**External practices.** These include restrictions of behavior based on a mistaken view of morality, restrictions of thought based on a mistaken view of meditation, and restrictions of knowledge based on a mistaken view of wisdom.

**Will suddenly wake up.** The Tsungpao edition replaces this with the phrase “can never again be corrupted.” It then deletes the lines that follow regarding the comparison of our prajna wisdom to the ocean and resumes with the line “this is to see your nature.”

**The mind that cultivates this practice.** In place of this line, the Tunhuang Cave edition and the Tsungpao edition have “those who are able to cultivate this practice.”

***Prajnaparamita Sutra.*** There are around two dozen sutras in the Chinese Buddhist Canon that teach the Prajnaparamita teaching, and this term has sometimes been used in reference to all of them or to specific sutras in this group, such as the *Diamond Sutra*. In the *Diamond Sutra* (13), when Subhuti asks the Buddha the name of this teaching, the Buddha tells him to call it the Prajnaparamita but warns him that “what the Tathagata says is the Prajnaparamita is no Prajnaparamita. Thus is it called the Prajnaparamita.” In his own commentary to the *Diamond Sutra*, Hui-neng makes it clear that the sutra itself is every buddha's *dharma-kaya*, or real body, and that those who cultivate its teaching share the same body of realization as every buddha.

**Textual note:** This section appears in Chapter Two of the Tsungpao edition, where it follows the preceding section.

**30. 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 been created 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 shallow, and the wise are deep. So the foolish ask the wise, and the wise teach the Dharma to the foolish until the foolish understand and their minds open up. But once foolish people understand, and their minds open up, they are no different from the wisest of the wise.**

**Hence, as long as they don't understand, buddhas are ordinary beings. But the moment they understand, ordinary beings are buddhas. Hence, the ten thousand teachings are all present within your own mind. So why don't you use your own mind to see the nature of reality directly?**

**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. And the *Vimalakirti Sutra* says, 'Suddenly all at once you rediscover your own mind.'**

All teachings, including those of the Prajnaparamita, are based on our understanding of what is real. Although most people nowadays view reality as matter, and some see it as energy, Buddhists see it as mind, but mind that isn't separate from matter or energy. The nature of things and the nature of mind, according to Buddhists, are not different. Even if we do separate the worlds of matter and mind, or energy and mind, we are only able to do so through the constructs of the mind. It is through our minds that we know anything at all, whether matter, energy, mind, or reality. But our minds are so clouded by delusions, it's a rare person who doesn't need instruction in how to dispel these clouds or why they should do so at all.

Hence, Buddhists have put together sutras for this purpose. Sutas are sort of like patent medicines. They represent formulas developed by spiritual physicians in the practice of their art of liberation. They're not meant for everyone or every occasion but for a certain audience and a certain occasion. Thus, many, if not most, of the texts in the Buddhist Canon have little relevance today. There is no substitute for a teacher who speaks to us in our own language and in our own time and to our own problems. Still, whether it's a two-thousand-year-old sutra or the words of our teacher, each is generated by and for the mind. Thus, to study the texts and words of others apart from an understanding of our own minds is to waste our time in external practices. But to get this message across, Huineng quotes the sutras because his audience holds them in such high regard—some even believed they possessed magic powers that could be activated through the proper recitation.

**Twelve divisions.** When Buddhists first began arranging their oral and written texts, they used an arrangement based largely



on literary form and subject matter. The sutras constituted the first and largest of the twelve divisions they used and included the prose sermons of the Buddha and his immediate disciples. These were followed by sections devoted to songs, poems, sermons occasioned by events, accounts of the Buddha's previous lives, Abhidharma matrices, and so on.

**Hinayana.** This term, which means "Lesser Path" or "Lesser Vehicle," was coined by early followers of the Mahayana to distinguish their emphasis on enlightenment and the liberation of others from those engaged in an ironically self-centered quest for nirvana. Although no sect or individual referred to themselves as Hinayana, the term was apt, as many followers of the Buddha maintained, and still maintain, a narrower, less compassionate view of his message.

**The ten thousand teachings are all present within your own mind.** This is the reading of the Tunhuang Museum copy as well as the Tsungpao edition. However, the Tunhuang Cave copy has: "the ten thousand teachings are all within your own self."

**Nature of reality.** *Bhutatahata* in Sanskrit or *chen-ju* in Chinese is usually translated as "suchness" or "what is real." This term is one of several used by Mahayana Buddhists to give their approach a more positive outlook than the goals of nirvana and the extinguishing of passions championed by Hinayana Buddhists.

**The Bodhisattva Precept Sutra.** The same quotes appear in Section 19. As he does there, Hui-neng misquotes the first word of the first quote to suit this context. The editors of the Tsungpao

and Chisung editions revert to the original, but by doing so, lose the force of the quote.

**Textual note:** This section appears in Chapter Two of the Tsungpao edition, where it follows the preceding section.

**31. Good friends, when I was with Master Hung-jen, as soon as I heard his words, I experienced a great realization, and I saw the original nature of reality directly. Therefore, I am passing on this teaching to later generations so that those who study the Way will realize enlightenment directly and so that those who contemplate the mind will realize their original nature directly. If you are unable to realize this by yourself, you need to find a truly good friend to point out the way to see your 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, a guide who helps people see their nature. All good teachings can only come about due to truly good friends.**

**The buddhas of the Three Periods and the twelve divisions of the Canon are fully present in this nature of yours. If you can’t realize this by yourselves, you need to find a good friend to show you how to see your nature. But if you realize this by yourselves, you don’t need to look for a good friend somewhere else. And if someone insists that you have to find a good friend somewhere else before you attain liberation, that place doesn’t exist. You will attain liberation when you meet the good friend inside**

**your own mind. But as long as your mind is full of confusion, delusion, and mistaken views, even the instruction of an external good friend won't be able to save you.**

To see our own nature is to see the nature of reality. There is no greater insight, no greater realization. Hence, we need all the help we can get. Such help might come in the form of a sutra, but it might also come in the form of instruction by a spiritual advisor. But the sort of instruction or advice we need to free ourselves from suffering can also be found within ourselves. And even if we do receive instruction from someone else, it won't have the desired effect unless it strikes a chord within us, unless it agrees with what we already know but have somehow forgotten. All the teachings of all the buddhas are present within us because all buddhas and all teachings arise from this very nature that we all share.

**To later generations.** This phrase is missing in the Tsungpao edition.

**Original nature of reality.** Our own nature is inseparable from what is real. The fundamental nature of reality is also our nature.

**Those who study the Way.** The word *tao*: “the way” was used by advocates of every form of spiritual practice in China. Not only Taoists but Confucians and Buddhists also referred to their practice by the term *Tao*. Here, though, it probably refers to Taoists or to Buddhist practitioners with Taoist leanings.

**Those who contemplate the mind.** This is aimed at followers of the Tientai School, for whom “stopping thoughts” and

“contemplating the mind” formed the basis of their practice. During the seventh century, the popularity of the Tientai sect rivaled that of Zen. This phrase is missing in the Tunhuang Cave copy.

**You will attain liberation when you meet the good friend inside your own mind.** In place of this line, the Tsungpao edition has: “In your own mind there is knowledge and self-realization.” It then omits the next sentence.

**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 the land of the mind of your nature. And when inside and outside are perfectly clear, you will know your own mind. And once you know your own mind, you will be free. And once you have gained your freedom, this is the samadhi of prajna. And the realization of the samadhi of prajna is no-thought.**

**And what do we mean by ‘no-thought’? The teaching of no-thought means to see all dharmas without being attached to any dharma, to reach everywhere without being attached anywhere, to keep your nature pure, so that when the Six Thieves pass through the Six Gates, they neither avoid nor are corrupted by the Six Realms of Sensation but come and go freely. This is the samadhi of prajna. Freedom and liberation constitute the practice of no-thought. But if you don’t think any thoughts at all, the moment you make your thoughts stop, you’re imprisoned by dharmas. We call this a ‘one-sided view.’**

**Those who understand the teaching of no-thought penetrate the ten thousand teachings. Those who understand the teaching of no-thought see the realm of buddhas. Those who understand the direct teaching of no-thought reach the stage of enlightenment.**

Our truest friend is the wisdom of prajna because it reveals to us the true nature of reality, not reality mediated by the hodge-podge of delusions we have created over countless lifetimes, but the reality of our own nature. If we use this light of wisdom, we will see things as they truly are, not how they appear. To see things as they truly are is to be free of subject and object, inside and outside, mind and matter. To see things as they truly are is to think no-thought, a thought that rides the Six Thieves, instead of being ridden by them, a thought that passes unhindered through the Six Gates, a thought that wanders freely through the landscape of the Six Realms of Sensation, stopping now and then to share a pot of no-thought tea.

**If you can't realize this by yourself.** This is missing in the Tsungpao edition.

**This is your truest friend. With one realization.** The Tsungpao edition omits this and says instead: "Once you know your own nature, once you realize this, you will reach the land of buddhas."

**Land of the mind.** Buddhists often liken the mind to a field in which we reap the fruit of our practice. The Tsungpao edition omits this expression.

**No-thought.** This expression is *wu-nien* in Chinese and was

used by Hui-neng and his later followers in contrast to the expression *li-nien*: “transcend thought” used by Shen-hsiu and his followers. Hui-neng’s point in making such a distinction is that you can’t transcend what isn’t there.

**Six Thieves.** This expression refers to our six powers of sensation. They are called *ts’ei*: “thieves” because they are said to “steal” our serenity and replace it with an endless procession of sensations that alternate between attraction and repulsion. This usage, however, goes back to the early days of Buddhism and betrays the Hinayana aversion toward the body and its functions. Mahayana Buddhism is less interested in making sensation, or anything else, into an enemy. Although both Tunhuang copies have the Six Thieves, later editions have “Six Kinds of Consciousness.”

**They neither avoid nor are corrupted.** The Tsungpao edition has: “They are neither corrupted by nor attached to . . . ”

**Come and go freely.** The Tsungpao edition follows this with: “and function without hindrance.”

**Textual note:** This section appears in Chapter Two of the Tsungpao edition, where it follows the preceding section.

**32. 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 the direct teaching of this school, it will be as if you were doing the work of a**

**buddha. And those who uphold it and don't forsake it for the rest of their lives will themselves enter the ranks of sages. But it must be passed on. The robe and the teaching that have been transmitted in silence since ancient times must be shared with others who make great vows and who don't forsake enlightenment.**

**However, no matter where you are, if someone holds a different view and lacks resolve, don't be foolish enough to teach them. Not only will you harm those who have come before you, ultimately it won't do them any good. For if they are too foolish to understand, and they criticize this teaching, they will sever their roots of enlightenment for a hundred kalpas and a thousand lifetimes."**

Hui-neng is approaching the end of the sermon around which this sutra was compiled. He has transmitted the Formless Precepts and explained the Prajnaparamita, and now he asks his audience to uphold this teaching and to pass it on to others. The reason Hui-neng stresses the transmission of this teaching is that it only exists to be transmitted. That's what a teaching is. Otherwise it wouldn't be a teaching. If it isn't transmitted, it disappears. It's like when we use one candle to light another candle. Our candle goes out, but not the light. Likewise, this teaching is transmitted from one mind to another.

But Hui-neng also warns against indiscriminate transmission. If someone is not ready to receive this teaching, and we try to instruct them, and they reject it, this will not only alienate them from the Dharma, it will also prolong their suffering on the Wheel of Existence and Non-existence. It would be like trying to use our candle to light someone's finger.

**True body.** As the Buddha does in the *Diamond Sutra*, Hui-neng likens the teaching to his threefold body. The teaching itself is the *dharma-kaya* of every buddha, the realization of the teaching is the *sanbohga-kaya* of every buddha, and the manifestation of the teaching is the *nirmana-kaya* of every buddha. But the teaching itself is every buddha's true body. Thus, those who encounter this teaching will find themselves in the presence of Hui-neng and the lineage of buddhas that he represents.

**Will find that my true body never leaves their presence.**  
**Good friends.** All of this is missing in the Tsungpao edition.

**Robe.** This word is only present in the Tunhuang Museum copy.

**Transmitted in silence.** As Lao-tzu wrote at the beginning of his *Taoteching*: "The Way that becomes a way / is not the Immortal Way. The name that becomes a name / is not the Immortal Name." (1) Likewise, many Buddhist masters have likened their instruction to a finger that points to the moon and not the moon itself. Thus, the real teaching is unspoken and unheard, and its transmission from one mind to another occurs in silence.

**Others who make great vows and who don't forsake enlightenment.** Attaining enlightenment is the fourth of the Four Vows listed in Section 21 and the basis for the other three. Hence, it alone is mentioned. In the Huihsin, Chisung, and Tsungpao editions, this line is replaced by: "Do not hide the true teaching."



**If they are too foolish.** In place of this phrase, the Tunhuang Cave edition has: “If you meet someone.”

**Textual note:** This section appears near the end of Chapter Two in the Tsungpao edition, where it follows the preceding section.

**33. The Master said, “Good friends, listen to my ‘Song of Formlessness.’ Because it can put an end to the sins of those of you who are deluded, it is also called the ‘Sin Ending Song.’ It goes:**

**‘Fools work for blessings not for the Way  
working for blessings they say is the Way  
from offerings and alms they earn endless merit  
then in their minds they build hateful futures.**

**Working for blessings trying to end sin  
next life their sins are there with their blessings  
to learn how to drive all sin from your mind  
within your own nature truly repent.**

**Once you understand Mahayana repentance  
you’ll end wrongs and do right and be without sin  
students of the Way who can see for themselves  
join the same lineage as the enlightened.**

**Your teacher transmits this direct teaching  
hoping you students will share the same body  
if in the future you seek your true self**

**purify your mind of what creates poison.**

**Walk the Way with vigor and don't be a slacker  
or suddenly you'll pass this life in vain  
if you come before the Mahayana's direct teaching  
press your hands together with a straightforward  
mind.”**

**After the Master had finished his discourse on the Dharma, Magistrate Wei and his fellow officials, the clerics and laypeople, all praised this without cease as something they had never heard before.**

The occasion that prompted this sermon was the transmission of the Formless Precepts and instruction in the teaching of Prajnaparamita to an audience numbering in the thousands. A mass ceremony like this no doubt attracted a diverse audience, but Hui-neng has not watered down his message, until now. Still, even a watered-down teaching makes a fine pot of tea.

Pai Chu-yi (772-846) was one of China's greatest poets and a devout student of Buddhism. Once when he was visiting a monastery in the mountains not far from where Hui-neng became the Sixth Patriarch, he asked its eminent abbot to tell him the most essential teaching of Buddhism. The monk then recited the following lines from the *Dhammapada*: “Commit no wrongs / perform good deeds / and let your thoughts be pure / thus do all buddhas teach.” This homily failed to impress the man who was the greatest poet of his age, who said, “Every child of three summers knows these lines. What I want to know is the most profound and most fundamental teaching of the Buddha.” The monk replied, “Every child of three summers knows these lines, but white-haired men of eighty still fail to put them into

practice.” Hearing this, the poet bowed low and returned home deep in thought.

The only area in which Hui-neng’s poem differs from that of the *Dhammapada* is his insistence that we not only stop committing wrongs but we also repent past misdeeds. It’s a psychological thing. Unless we repent past wrongs, we are likely to commit them again. Old habits die hard. And it isn’t just the habits of word and deed but the thought constructs that go with them. Ways of speaking and acting are hard to change, but ways of thinking and feeling are much harder.

**Hateful futures.** The three hateful realms of existence on the Wheel of Rebirth: as a hungry ghost, as a sinner in hell, as a plant or animal.

**To learn how to drive all sin from your mind.** The Tunhuang Cave edition has *chung*: “inside,” in place of *hsin*: “mind,” which is in the Tunhuang Museum edition and all later editions.

**Once you understand Mahayana repentance.** The Huihsin, Chisung, and Tsungpao editions have *hu*: “directly,” in place of *juo*: “once/if.”

**Your teacher transmits this direct teaching / hoping you students will share the same body.** The Huihsin, Chisung, and Tsungpao editions change this to: “The master only transmits this direct teaching / may you all see your nature and share the same body.”

**If in the future you seek your true self / purify your mind of what creates poison.** The Three Poisons of Delusion, Greed, and Anger are meant. The Huihsin, Chisung, and

Tsungpao editions change this to: “If in the future you seek your dharma body / purge from your mind the attributes of dharmas.”

**Walk the Way with vigor and don't be a slacker / or suddenly you'll pass this life in vain.** The Huihsin, Chisung, and Tsungpao editions have: “Strive to see yourself and don't be a slacker / when the next thought stops you can rest your whole life.”

**If you come before the Mahayana's direct teaching.** In the Huihsin, Chisung, and Tsungpao editions this becomes: “If you realize the Mahayana and can see your nature.”

**Textual note:** This section has been moved to near the end of Chapter Six in the Tsungpao edition, where it has been inserted between Sections 20 and 37.

**34. The Magistrate bowed respectfully and said, “Master, your discourse on the Dharma is beyond conception. But your disciple has a few questions he would like to ask and hopes the Master will answer them out of compassion.”**

The Master said, “If you have a question, ask. There's no need to say more.”

The Magistrate asked, “Isn't the Dharma the Master teaches the basic doctrine of Bodhidharma, the First Patriarch from the Western Region?”

The Master said, “Yes, it is.”

The Magistrate asked, “Your disciple has heard that when Bodhidharma taught Emperor Wu of Liang, the emperor asked Bodhidharma, ‘All my life I have built

monasteries and made offerings and given alms, but is there any merit in this?' Bodhidharma answered, 'No merit at all.' And the emperor was so upset, he expelled Bodhidharma from his kingdom. I've never understood this and hope the Master will explain it."

The Sixth Patriarch said, "Indeed, there was no merit. Your Eminence should not doubt Bodhidharma's response. Emperor Wu followed a mistaken path and did not recognize 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 can't confuse blessings with merit. Merit concerns the dharma body, not a field of blessings. It's your own dharma nature that possesses merit. To see your nature is one part of it, to be impartial and straightforward is the other. Internally see your buddha nature, and externally be respectful. If you slight others, you're not free of the self, and you're devoid of merit. As long as your nature is an empty fiction, your dharma body possesses no merit. But if thought after thought you cultivate an impartial and straightforward mind, your merit is far from slight. And when you show your respect, doing this with your body is one part of merit, and doing it with your mind is the other. But merit is created by the mind. Blessings and merit are different. Emperor Wu did not understand the true meaning of this. It wasn't the Patriarch who was at fault."

Magistrate Wei represents those members of the audience who might have misunderstood Hui-neng's "Song of Formlessness,"

in which he urges people to “end wrongs and do right and be without sin.” The Magistrate wonders, if that is all there is to his message, why did Bodhidharma criticize the good works of Emperor Wu?

In clarifying what he means by ending wrongs and doing right, Hui-neng distinguishes merit from blessings. Merit includes any acts that lead to the realization of one’s true nature, one’s dharma body. Blessings include acts that merely improve a person’s karma as they move from state to state and life to life on the Wheel of Existence. Blessings are helpful, but merit is essential to liberation. Blessings are the fruit of external cultivation. Merit is the fruit of internal cultivation, but cultivation that is ultimately free of the distinction between internal and external.

We can see, in this and the sections that follow, the work of an editor, or editors, intent on addressing certain concerns that arose in the Zen community that had not been addressed in what was probably an earlier version of this text. One of these concerns was the position of Bodhidharma. Other early Zen lineages, for example, included Gunabhadra, the translator of the *Lankavatara Sutra*, as the First Patriarch of Zen.

**The Magistrate bowed.** In the Tsungpao edition, Magistrate Wei hosts a vegetarian banquet in Hui-neng’s honor then poses his question after asking his guest to ascend the teacher’s seat.

**First Patriarch from the Western Region.** According to a tradition that dates back to at least the time of Hui-neng, Bodhidharma was the Twenty-eighth Patriarch of Zen in India. The Western Region included most of Central Asia but also all of India. Bodhidharma was from the southern tip of the

subcontinent. Since he was presumably the first person to bring Zen to China, he is also called the First Patriarch, but the First Patriarch *from* the Western Region, not *of* the Western Region.

**Emperor Wu of Liang.** The Liang dynasty controlled most of South and Southeast China during the first half of the sixth century. Emperor Wu, whose long reign lasted from 502 to 549, was famous for his support of Buddhist monks and institutions and on several occasions even emptied the imperial treasury on their behalf. China's Confucian-minded historians have criticized him for this and have even attributed the downfall of his dynasty to such extravagance.

According to the traditional account of this meeting, the emperor failed to understand Bodhidharma's instruction, hence the First Patriarch of Zen could hardly be said to have "taught" the emperor anything. However, this traditional account is at odds with the subsequent respect shown by Emperor Wu to Bodhidharma. When Bodhidharma died, the emperor ordered two steles erected at his grave below the West Peak of Bear Ear Mountain, which was not within his borders but in the kingdom of Wei far to the north. Sung-dynasty copies of these two steles were recently unearthed at the gravesite, one of them with the earliest known likeness of Bodhidharma. Emperor Wu also ordered a stele erected at the grave of Hui-k'o, the Second Patriarch, as well. A T'ang-dynasty copy of this stele was also recently unearthed at the gravesite.

**And the emperor was so upset, he expelled Bodhidharma from his kingdom.** The capital of the Liang dynasty was located in what is now Nanching/Nanking, which is on the southern shore of the Yangtze, just before it bends east and

begins its final push to the sea. Bodhidharma is often depicted heading north after this event, crossing the Yangtze on a single hollow reed. This line does not appear in the Tsungpao edition.

**The Sixth Patriarch.** This is the first usage of this term in this text and suggests that we are now seeing the first in a series of additions to the original draft text of the sutra, but additions that were likely made during Hui-neng's lifetime or soon after his death.

**Your Eminence.** This usage, *shih-chun*, occurs in both Tunhuang copies, but later editions have simply *tz'u-shih*: "magistrate."

**Followed a mistaken path.** The Tsungpao edition has "mistaken mind."

**The Magistrate asked, "But why was there no merit?"**

**The Master said.** This is absent in the Tsungpao edition.

**Merit concerns the dharma body.** In his *Diamond Sutra* commentary, Hui-neng says, "The dharma body has no form or appearance. It has no characteristics. Only the eye of wisdom can see it. The dharma body is like the sky." And "Those who see the dharma body are able to practice charity without focusing on appearances; they are able to respect all beings; and they are able to cultivate the Prajnaparamita. They alone believe all beings share the same true nature that is basically pure and free of defilement and that possesses infinite wonders." (5)

**Field of blessings.** This was a common metaphor for the fruit of one's spiritual endeavors. The Tsungpao edition has "cultivate



blessings.”

**It's your own dharma nature that possesses merit.** This is absent in the Tsungpao edition and is replaced with “thought after thought without impediment.”

**To see your nature is one part of it.** This is omitted in the Tunhuang Cave copy but not in the Tunhuang Museum copy. In the Tsungpao edition, this is “always see your nature and its truly wondrous activity.” The Tsungpao edition also adds a long series of further definitions of merit here and rewrites the rest of the section up to the line “But blessings and merit are different.”

**Internally see.** These words are missing in both Tunhuang versions and are supplied here from later editions.

**As long as your nature is an empty fiction, your dharma body possesses no merit.** In the Huihsin, Chisung, and Tsungpao editions, this is changed to: “As long as your nature is an empty fiction and not real, it possesses no merit.”

**It wasn't the Patriarch who was at fault.** Hui-neng's meaning is that it wasn't Bodhidharma who was at fault for not appreciating the charitable work of Emperor Wu. It was Emperor Wu who was at fault for not understanding the true nature of merit.

**Textual note:** This section appears at the beginning of Chapter Three in the Tsungpao edition.

**35. The Magistrate bowed respectfully and asked again,**

**“Your disciple sees monks and laypeople who keep chanting ‘Amita Buddha’ in hopes of being reborn in the Western Paradise. Could the Master please tell us if we can be reborn there or not, so that our doubts may be put to rest?”**

**The Master said, “If Your Eminence will listen, I will explain. When the Blessed One was in Shravasti, he preached about the Western Paradise in order to convert people. The sutras clearly say it isn’t far from here. It was only for the sake of those with shallow roots that he said it was distant. But he said it was near for those with greater wisdom. There are two kinds of people but not two kinds of Dharma. Delusion and awareness differ, and understanding can be fast or slow. Deluded people chant the Buddha’s name in order to be reborn there, while those who are aware purify their own minds. This is why the Buddha said, ‘As their minds are purified, their buddhalands are purified.’**

**Your Eminence, if people here in the East simply purify their minds, they will be free of sin. But if people in the West have impure minds and go too far, the deluded among them might wish to be reborn here in the East. The two places are both the same. As long as the land of your mind isn’t impure, the Western Paradise isn’t far off. But if your mind gives rise to impure thoughts, chanting the Buddha’s name won’t get you reborn there. You’ll travel a hundred thousand miles before you eliminate the Ten Evil Deeds, and another eight thousand before you put an end to the Eight Wrong Ways. But if you just practice with a straightforward mind, you’ll be there in a fingersnap.**

**Your Eminence, if you just practice the Ten Good**

**Deeds, why would you need to be reborn somewhere else? And unless you stop thinking about the Ten Evil Deeds, what buddha will welcome you? Once you realize the direct teaching of no-birth, seeing the Western Paradise only takes an instant. And if you don't realize the direct teaching of the Mahayana, chanting the Buddha's name to be reborn there will only take you on a long road that never arrives."**

Buddhists have developed countless practices aimed at the liberation of the mind. Many people, however, become attached to the practice they choose and forget its purpose. One of the most popular practices throughout East Asia for the past 1,500 years has been seeking rebirth in the Pure Land of Amita Buddha, where people are said to find it easier to understand the Dharma and gain liberation than in this world of impurity. But all Buddhist practices have nothing to do with anything more or less than the mind. If our minds are impure, we live impure lives no matter where we find ourselves. And if our minds are pure, what need is there to be reborn somewhere else?

**The sutras clearly say it isn't far from here.** In the *Amita Sutra*, the Buddha tells Shariputra, "West of here, past hundreds of thousands and millions of buddhalands, there is a world called Paradise. In that land there is a buddha named Amita." But in the *Visualization of Paradise Sutra*, the Buddha tells Queen Vaidehi, "Do you not know that Amita Buddha is not far from here?"

After this line in our text, the Tsungpao edition adds: "As it says in the shastras, it is 108,000 li away. This refers to the Ten Evil Deeds and the Eight Wrong Ways within the body. This is

why it's said to be far." The reason for this number was because the presumed distance from the T'ang-dynasty capital of Ch'ang-an to Shakyamuni's hometown of Kapilavastu was said to be 108,000 *li* (two *li* = one kilometer, three *li* = one mile).

**It was only for the sake of those with shallow roots that he said it was distant.** Although this is the reading of the Tunhuang Museum copy, as well as the Huihsin, Chisung, and Tsungpao editions, the Tunhuang Cave copy says that for those with shallow roots the Western Paradise is near, and for those with greater wisdom it is far. Guo Peng defends this as making the distance seem less awesome for the less endowed. But Hui-neng's point is that the Pure Land is within us all but that such a perception requires greater wisdom.

**As their minds are purified, their buddhalands are purified.** This is from the *Vimalakirti Sutra* (1).

**And go too far.** After this line, the Tsungpao edition has: "If people in the East commit sins, they chant the name of the buddha to be reborn in the West. But if people in the West commit sins and chant the name of the buddha, where do they hope to be reborn? Ignorant people don't understand their own natures and don't recognize the Pure Land in their own bodies. They want to go to the East, or they want to go to the West. But for those who are enlightened, every place is the same. Thus, the Buddha said, 'Wherever they are, they are always happy.'"

**The deluded among them might wish to be reborn here in the East.** The Tunhuang Cave copy has: "Those who are deluded might wish to be reborn in the East or in the West." The

Chinese characters for “west” and “both” (in the following line) have been confused, and this version is not supported by any other edition.

**Ten Evil Deeds.** These include murder, theft, adultery, falsehood, slander, gossip, profanity, avarice, anger, and delusion.

**Eight Wrong Ways.** These are contrasted with the Eight Right Ways, or the Eightfold Noble Path: wrong views, wrong thought, wrong speech, wrong behavior, wrong livelihood, wrong effort, wrong mindfulness, and wrong meditation.

**But if you just practice with a straightforward mind.** The Tsungpao edition has: “If thought after thought you see your nature and always practice with a straightforward mind . . .” Also, after “in a snap,” the same edition adds “and you’ll see Amita.”

**Ten Good Deeds.** These are defined as the non-committal of the Ten Evil Deeds.

**The Sixth Patriarch said, “I will take Your Eminence to the Western Paradise right now, and you will witness it for yourself. 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 all of you the Western Paradise, and you won’t leave here until you are free of**

doubt.” The assembly was startled, and no one knew what was going to happen.

The Master said, “All of you should listen carefully. Everyone’s physical body is a city. Your eyes, ears, nose, tongue, and skin are the city’s gates. These five gates are on the outside, and on the inside is the gate of the intellect. Your mind is the kingdom, and your nature is the king. When your nature is there, so is the king. When your nature is gone, the king is gone too. When your nature is present, your body and mind are present. When your nature is absent, your body and mind cease to exist. The Buddha is a creation of your nature. Don’t look outside your body. When you’re blind to your own nature, the Buddha is an ordinary being. When you’re aware of your own nature, an ordinary being is the Buddha.

Compassion and Kindness are Avalokiteshvara. Joy and Detachment are Mahasthama. Power and Purity are Shakyamuni. Impartiality and Directness are Maitreya. The self is Mount Sumeru, and the deluded mind is the ocean. Afflictions are its waves, poisonous thoughts are its malevolent dragons, and passions are its denizens of the deep. Delusions are its ghosts, the Three Poisons are its hells, ignorance is its realm of beasts, and the Ten Good Deeds are its heavens.

But when there is no self, Sumeru crumbles. When you get rid of delusions, the sea dries up. When afflictions are gone, the waves cease. When poisonous thoughts end, the denizens of the deep vanish. When the tathagata of your enlightened nature shines the light of wisdom on the land of your mind, the Six Gates shine with purity, the realms of the Six Desires become transparent, the Three Poisons

disappear, the hells all vanish, inside and outside are perfectly clear and no different from the Western Paradise. Unless you practice like this, how are you going to get there?”

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

Hui-neng doesn't want his audience to think that Zen is based on a different view of the Dharma than Pure Land Buddhism, which was and still is the most popular form of Buddhism among laypeople in China. There are not two truths, only different ways of approaching the truth. Hui-neng's concern is that people might use the teaching of rebirth in the Pure Land of Amita Buddha to create another set of delusions. Thus, he interprets some of the most popular elements of Pure Land Buddhism in terms of Zen. And so he likens our world of impurity to the world of the deluded mind, which revolves around the mountain of the self and which collapses in its absence. Thus, without leaving Tahan Temple, he transports his audience to the Pure Land of their own minds. In fact, this is where the Pure Land sutras also take their followers. But even in the Pure Land sutras, the Pure Land is never presented as anything more than a provisional reality, a reality where it is easier to understand the Dharma than in the impure realm in which we find ourselves and in which we often feel overwhelmed.

**The Sixth Patriarch said.** As in the previous section, this

reference to Hui-neng's position suggests this section was added after the initial compilation of this sutra. In the decades immediately after his death, Hui-neng's disciples were very active in trying to establish their teacher's position in the Zen pantheon, and thus their own stature as well. This does not necessarily mean that his disciples composed this section. My own feeling is that Sections 2-32 (or at least Sections 12-32) constitute Hui-neng's teaching on one specific occasion and that the other sections, beginning with Section 33, were added later and based on his remarks on other occasions. In the Tsungpao edition, the remarks in this section are addressed to the assembly and not to the Magistrate.

**The Master said, "I will show you all the Western Paradise, and you won't leave here until you are free of doubt." The assembly was startled, and no one knew what was going to happen.** This is absent in the Tsungpao edition.

**Everyone's physical body is a city.** In the sutras, Amita's Pure Land is described in much the same fashion as a royal city, with promenades and towers and pavilions and gardens and, of course, gates to keep out the impure.

**The Buddha is an ordinary being.** Hui-neng is likening the members of his audience to Amita Buddha.

**Compassion and Kindness.** These are the first two of the four boundless states of mind cultivated by bodhisattvas. The other two are Joy and Detachment.

**Avalokiteshvara.** This is the Bodhisattva of Compassion and easily the most popular figure in all of Mahayana Buddhism. This



is also the only bodhisattva who regularly appears in either male or female form.

**Mahasthama.** In the Pure Land, this bodhisattva takes the place normally ascribed to Manjushri, the Bodhisattva of Wisdom. The reason these two bodhisattvas, Avalokiteshvara and Mahasthama, are mentioned first is because they stand on either side of Amita Buddha in the Western Paradise and welcome those who are reborn there.

**Shakyamuni.** An early interpretation of Shakyamuni's name claimed that *shakya* meant "power." However, among the many meanings attributed to *muni*, none is "purity." Perhaps Hui-neng has Shakyamuni's father in mind. His father's name, Shuddodana, was said to mean "pure rice."

**Maitreya.** This is the next buddha prophesied to appear after Shakyamuni. Although he has no connection with Amita's Pure Land, the buddhaland over which he is said to preside is often described in similar terms.

**Mount Sumeru.** This mountain is countless leagues high and is the center of every world and is a metaphor for the self. According to the Buddhist conception of the world, this mountain is surrounded by a series of seven oceans separated from one another by seven mountain ranges. The world as we normally conceive of it, and which Buddhists said was made up of four continents, is outside the seventh range.

**Delusions are its ghosts.** In this series, Hui-neng lists only four of the Six States of Existence: hungry ghosts, denizens of hell,

beasts, and celestial beings. He omits humans and malevolent beings.

**Three Poisons.** These include delusion, desire, and anger, which are the driving forces of the Wheel of Rebirth and its Six States of Existence.

**And the Ten Good Deeds are its heavens.** In the Tsungpao edition, this becomes: “Good friends, if you always perform the Ten Good Deeds, the heavens will appear before you.”

**When the tathagata of your enlightened nature.** The “tathagata” here refers to Amita Buddha.

**Six Gates.** These include the six sources of sensation: the eyes, ears, nose, tongue, skin, and mind. The Six Desires are the sensations associated with the six senses: seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, feeling, and thinking.

**When the audience heard this.** To this, the Tsungpao edition adds: “They saw their natures completely.”

**Dharma Realm.** This is a Buddhist term (*dharma-dhatu*) for the world of dharmas, or constituents of the mind, as opposed to the world of objects. Thus, it is often used as a synonym for “reality.”

**Textual note:** This section appears in Chapter Three of the Tsungpao edition, where it follows the previous section.

**36. The Master said, “Good friends, if you wish to**

practice this, you can do it at home too. It doesn't require living in a monastery. If you live in a monastery and don't practice, you're like those people in the Western Paradise who think bad thoughts. And if you practice at home, you're like the people here in the East who perform good deeds. As long as you resolve 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 this into practice, you will never be apart from me. My song goes:

'Versed in words and versed in thoughts  
like the sun in the sky  
transmitting their teaching directly  
appearing in the world to vanquish false doctrines  
it isn't their teaching that's direct or not  
but awareness that's quick or slow  
foolish people who study this teaching  
can't understand the Dharma directly.

There must be ten thousand ways to explain it  
but all are based on one rule  
in your dark house of afflictions  
keep the sun of wisdom shining  
falsehood arrives because of afflictions  
when truth appears afflictions depart  
letting truth and falsehood be  
nothing is left to purify.

Enlightenment is already pure  
the thought of it is a delusion  
but inside delusion is purity  
once truth removes the Three Obstructions  
if you follow the Way in this world  
let nothing block your path  
paying attention to your own mistakes  
will keep you in step with the Way.

The Way dwells in this bodily likeness  
don't leave the Way to look for the Way  
you won't find the Way that way  
all you will find is trouble  
if you want to find the true Way  
to cultivate truth is the Way  
unless your mind is set on the truth  
you'll pass it by in the dark.

People who truly follow the Way  
don't consider the faults of the world  
Those who consider the wrongs of the world  
only add to their own  
I don't condemn the faults of others  
my own wrongs are what I'm after  
just get rid of thoughts about wrongs  
and all your afflictions will shatter:  
If you would then teach foolish people  
you'll need to use skillful means  
if you can rid them of doubts  
their enlightenment is certain

**the Dharma is in the world  
in the world beyond the world  
don't run away from the world  
to find a place beyond the world.**

**False views make up the world  
true views are the world beyond  
when true and false are both dismissed  
your buddha nature will be manifest  
this is simply the straightforward teaching  
also known as the Mahayana  
delusion lasts countless kalpas  
awareness takes but an instant.”**

Hui-neng offers us another “Song of Formlessness.” The teaching of formlessness forms the heart of the *Diamond Sutra*, in which Subhuti asks the Buddha how to stand, how to walk, and how to control his thoughts. And the Buddha responds by telling him to see standing as not standing, to see walking as not walking, to see controlling his thoughts as not controlling his thoughts, and to see form as no form. This is what Hui-neng means by “formlessness.” But like the word “emptiness,” this is not a simple negation. It's a double-negation, the negation of the negation that form represents, and the negation of the negation that standing, walking, and controlling thoughts represents.

Here, Hui-neng urges us to purify ourselves instead of some form that might be reborn in paradise. As the Buddha says in the *Vimalakirti Sutra* (1): “As you purify your mind, your buddhaland is purified.” If we wish to help others, we need to help ourselves first. And we can do this best by transcending the world while remaining in the world. We can't hide from our own minds. The sooner we face ourselves, the sooner we see our

own nature. This is the direct and straightforward teaching, the understanding of which is closer than a thought away.

**Versed in words and versed in thoughts.** This refers to buddhas, who are skilled in using language and also in understanding the minds of those they teach. Thus, they are able to use whatever means are best suited to their audience.

**It isn't their teaching that's direct or not.** The teaching is simply so. When we finally understand it, it appears direct because it has been right in front of us. When we don't understand it, it appears indirect because it takes forever to comprehend.

**Falsehood arrives because of afflictions.** In response to our afflictions we create more delusions, which give rise to more afflictions.

**Three Obstructions.** There are different lists of these, but usually they refer to the obstructions of circumstance (karma), passion (anger and desire), and knowledge (delusion). This is also the list usually used in interpreting the same term in the *Heart Sutra*.

**The Way dwells in this bodily likeness.** The term *ssu-lei*: "bodily likeness" refers to the first of the eighteen perfections of a buddha's *sanbogha-kaya*, or body of realization.

**Don't leave the Way to look for the Way.** Concerning the Way, Confucius had this to say, "The Way is what you can never leave. What you can leave isn't the Way." (*Doctrine of the*

*Mean:* 1)

**Those who consider the wrongs of the world / only add to their own.** These two lines are missing in the Tsungpao edition.

**If you would then teach foolish people / you'll need to use skillful means.** Before this couplet, the Tsungpao edition adds another: "Neither love nor hate affects the mind / sleep with your legs stretched out."

**False views make up the world / true views are the world beyond.** Before this couplet, the Tsungpao edition adds another: "Seeking enlightenment outside the world / is like looking for rabbit horns."

**Textual note:** The first part of this section appears near the end of Chapter Three in the Tsungpao edition, where it follows Section 35. The second part, which includes the above poem, appears near the end of Chapter Two, where it follows Section 32.

**37. The Master said, "Good friends, if you all recite this verse and practice in accordance with it, even if we're a thousand miles apart, you'll always be by my side. And if you don't practice in accordance with it, even if we're face-to-face, you'll be a thousand miles away. Each of you must practice yourselves. The Dharma won't do it for you.**

**It's time now for you all to leave and for me to return to Tsaohsi Mountain. If any of you have any important questions, come to the mountain. I'll get rid of them for you, and you'll all see your buddha nature."**

**The entire audience of officials, clerics, and laypeople all bowed to the Master; and everyone sighed, “What a great realization! How unprecedented! Who would have guessed that we would be blessed with a buddha here in Lingnan?” Then everyone left.**

As he prepares to leave Tafa Temple and the city of Shaozhou/Shaoquan and head back to Paolin Temple at the foot of Tsaohsishan, Hui-neng tells his audience what they have known all along. There is no teaching in Buddhism that does not lead us back to our own minds. But teachings can only lead us to water. Whether or not we drink is up to us. These words were spoken thirteen hundred years ago, but they are still fresh today. Why not fill up your kettle and make some tea? Of all the words in this sutra, these are the only ones we need to remember: Each of us must practice ourselves. No one else can do it for us. Nor can any text take our place. The rest of this sutra amounts to so much Buddhist shoptalk. This was also the Buddha’s last instruction to his disciples: If you want anything done right, you have to do it yourself.

**It’s time now for you all to leave.** This marks the conclusion of the talk that began with Section 1.

**Tsaohsi Mountain.** This mountain is about sixteen kilometers south of Shaokuan. The monastery where Hui-neng lived is still there, at the foot of the mountain’s southern slope. Daily visitors and pilgrims number in the hundreds, and occasionally the thousands.

**Buddha nature.** When we have no more questions, only our buddha nature remains. In the Tunhuang Cave copy, this



appears as *fo-shih*: “buddha world.”

**Who would have guessed.** The appearance of the character *chih*: “wisdom” in place of *chih*: “know” (and thus, “guessed”) has led to a number of variants for this phrase: The Tunhuang Cave copy has “who could have been wise,” while in the Huihsin, Chisung, and Tsungpao editions this has been deleted, and in its place another line appears in the previous sentence: “no one was not enlightened.”

**Blessed with a buddha here in Lingnan.** It was, no doubt, such statements as this that led Hui-neng’s followers to call this text a *ching*: “sutra.” Lingnan was the old name for what is now Kuangtung province.

**Textual note:** This section is greatly simplified in the Tsungpao edition, where it is broken up and its various parts placed at the ends of Chapters Two, Three, and Six in the Tsungpao edition and after Sections 33 and 36 in this edition.

## PART III (SECTIONS 38-44)

**38. The Master lived on Tsaohsi Mountain and preached in Shaochou and Kuangchou for more than forty years. In terms of disciples, both monks and nuns as well as laypeople, he had somewhere between three and five thousand, too many to name. As for his basic principle, he transmitted the *Platform Sutra* and used this as 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 passed it on. Without the authority of the *Platform Sutra*, they aren't disciples of the Southern School. If they haven't yet received this authority, even if they teach the direct teaching, they still won't understand its fundamentals and can't avoid arguments. However, those who have received this teaching are simply urged to practice it. Arguing about it involves thoughts of victory or defeat and is contradictory to the Way of the Buddha.**

In the decades that followed Hui-neng's death in 713, and even prior to it, some of his disciples claimed their teacher alone taught the true Dharma transmitted by Bodhidharma. Here, we see the beginning of that process whereby they sought to promote their master, and thus themselves, to the pantheon of Zen heroes. And it was probably about the same time that the text was elevated to a sutra.

Exactly when this section and those that follow were added will likely never be known. Certainly it was sometime before the edition that found its way to Tunhuang was made, which was

probably around 780 and no later than 801. But lost in the debate over whether or not this was part of the original text is the remark here that Hui-neng transmitted this sutra as his *yi-yueh*: “testament,” which would place its composition during his lifetime. I think this comes closer to the truth, and I can envision his disciples, at their master’s behest, making a record that included Sections 1-37 and perhaps this section as well, and Hui-neng handing this out to those three to five thousand people who became his disciples, sort of a souvenir and a reminder of this teaching.

Despite the exclusivity claimed here for this text, to paraphrase Hui-neng, there are not two kinds of Dharma. It is just that some people are quick and others are slow in understanding. Thus, we have different teachings. But no single teaching is inherently better than other teachings, just as no medicine is a panacea. Each medicine has to suit the disease and the patient for whom it is intended. Still, some people are better physicians than others, and some people are better teachers. But sooner or later, we all need a dose of this direct teaching, whether it’s administered by Hui-neng or someone else, simply because it deals with the root of all diseases, our refusal to face ourselves.

**More than forty years.** Different sources give different accounts of the length of time during which Hui-neng taught the Dharma. Forty years is about average.

**Between three and five thousand.** This was not an exaggeration. Hui-neng had thousands of disciples. But by *men-jen*: “disciples” is meant those with whom he had some form of direct contact and to whom he transmitted the teaching

contained in this sutra, if not the sutra itself. Perhaps they took refuge in the Three Treasures or the bodhisattva precepts or the full precepts of a monk or nun under his guidance. Or perhaps they simply acknowledged him as their teacher. Zen monasteries during the T'ang dynasty often had upwards of a thousand clerics and laity in residence at any one time.

**They need to state the place, etc.** The same sort of record accompanies the transmission of the precepts to monks, nuns, and laypeople. This text is, after all, an account of Hui-neng's transmission of the Formless Precepts.

**Southern School.** This is the first use of this term in the text itself and would suggest that from this point on we can see the editorial work of the next generation of disciples, as they used this sutra to assert the superiority of their teacher's teaching as opposed to that of Shen-hsiu.

**Textual note:** This section does not appear in the Tsungpao edition. Apparently, the sectarian bias was too much for later editors.

**39. People all refer to “Hui-neng of the South” and “Shen-hsiu of the North,” but they don't know the real reason for this. It was because Master Shen-hsiu served as abbot and practiced at Yuchuan Temple in Tangyang County of Nanching Prefecture, and Master Hui-neng lived on Tsaohsi Mountain, thirty-five *li* south of Shaochou. There's only one school of Dharma, but people are from the north or the south. This is why we use the terms “Northern” and “Southern.”**

**And what is the origin of “direct” and “indirect”? Although there is only one kind of Dharma, understanding can be fast or slow. When understanding is slow, we say it’s “indirect.” And when understanding is fast, we say it’s “direct.” The Dharma isn’t direct or indirect, it’s people who are sharp or dull. This is why we have the terms “direct” and “indirect.”**

This was the standard explanation advanced by Hui-neng’s later followers: The Northern and Southern Schools of Zen developed in China during the T’ang because the most famous Zen teachers of the time, Shen-hsiu and Hui-neng, were from the North and the South, respectively. And the reason the teaching of Shen-hsiu was called “indirect” was because the people he taught were slow. And the reason the teaching of Hui-neng was called “direct” was because people he taught were fast. But if this was the case, then there was nothing inherently direct or indirect about the teaching of these two men and the schools that claimed them for their founders. The onus for the use of these terms would then be on the students and not the teachers. The implication is that Hui-neng was simply luckier than Shen-hsiu in having quicker students. What the editor or editors seem to have muddled here is that although there is only one kind of Dharma, there are many kinds of dharmas, or teachings. Some dharmas are direct, and others are indirect. What is really at issue here is not the understanding of the students but the understanding of the teachers. Some teachers are incapable of teaching directly, mind-to-mind. Others are. This is the reason behind the use of these terms.

**Yuchuan Temple.** The name of this temple means “Jade

Spring.” Although a small shrine with this name was built on Yuchuan Mountain several hundred years earlier, it wasn’t until 593 that a monastery was established here. It was built by Chih-yi, the patriarch of the Tientai School of Chinese Buddhism, and during the T’ang dynasty it was one of the largest and most prominent monastic centers in all of China. However, according to the temple’s own records, Shen-hsiu did not live there. Nor did he ever serve as its abbot. He moved to Yuchuan Mountain in 677, but he settled in the small hermitage of Tumen Temple several kilometers to the east and lived here until 700. Yuchuan Temple and the site of Shen-hsiu’s former residence are both located about twelve kilometers southwest of the city of Tangyang/Dangyang and less than a hundred kilometers northeast of what is now the Three Gorges Dam on the Yangtze River.

The editor’s implication is that the association of Shen-hsiu with the North was due to the location of Yuchuan Temple, which was about a thousand kilometers directly north of where Hui-neng lived. Although this was sufficient reason as far as the editor was concerned to justify the distinction between the Northern and Southern Schools, I think it was more likely that Shen-hsiu’s name was linked with the North because he was a northerner from Kaifeng and because he spent his final years (700-706) lecturing to audiences in the capitals of Loyang and Ch’ang-an. These cities were all in the Yellow River watershed of North China, and not in the Yangtze watershed, where Yuchuan Temple was located and which even during the T’ang was considered part of the South. Still, it is possible that for someone like Fa-hai, who presumably edited this text and who spent his life in the far south, Yuchuan Temple was sufficiently far north to qualify as the North. I only mention this because I think

it adds weight to the traditional attribution of editorship of this sutra to Fa-hai, rather than to Shen-hui and his disciples, who were from the North and who would have never mistaken the location of Yuchuan Temple as in North China.

**Thirty-five li south.** Two *li* is equal to one kilometer, three *li* to one mile. Thus, thirty-five *li* is about seventeen kilometers. The official figure given nowadays for the distance between Shaokuan and Tsaohsishan is sixteen kilometers. I have amended the text, which has *tung*: “east,” and have substituted *nan*: “south” to reflect the actual direction. Either “east” was a mistake or the distance was calculated from the city’s East Gate.

**Textual note:** This section appears at the beginning of Chapter Eight in the Tsungpao edition, which simplifies the locations and rearranges some of the text.

**40. Master Shen-hsiu often heard people say that Hui-neng’s teaching was fast and pointed straight to the path. So Shen-hsiu told his disciple Chih-ch’eng, “You’re intelligent and perceptive. Go to Huineng’s place on Tsaohsi Mountain for me and pay your respects, but just listen. Don’t say I sent you. When you hear something important, make a note of it and come back and tell me. We’ll see whose understanding is fast or slow, mine or Hui-neng’s. And come back right away. Don’t leave me hanging.”**

**Chih-ch’eng gladly accepted the mission and left, and within half a month he reached Tsaohsi Mountain and met Master Hui-neng. After he paid his respects, he just**

listened and didn't say where he was from. But as soon as Chih-ch'eng heard the Master teach, he understood, and he grasped his original mind. He stood up and bowed and said, "Master, your disciple has come from Yuchuan Temple. At Shen-hsiu's place, I didn't experience any realization. But as soon as I heard the Master speak, I grasped my original mind. I hope the Master will be compassionate enough to instruct me."

Master Hui-neng said, "If that's where you're from, you must be a spy."

Chih-ch'eng said, "I'm not a spy."

The Sixth Patriarch said, "And why not?"

Chih-ch'eng said, "Before I spoke, I was. But now that I've spoken, I'm not."

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

Beginning with this section, we meet a series of disciples whose encounters with Hui-neng brought out various aspects of his teaching that the editor thought worth including. This series, which runs through Section 44, begins with Chih-ch'eng because it allows the editor to contrast the teaching of Hui-neng with that of Shen-hsiu. And he presents Hui-neng as simply a better teacher. He is a better teacher because his understanding is deeper. And because his understanding is deeper, he is better at speaking directly to his students. This is really all there was to this business about "direct" and "indirect." It's simply the teacher's ability to teach and the student's ability to learn. If one of the two isn't up to the task, no teaching or learning can take place. Of course, students like to elevate their teacher as well as themselves. And once the teacher is gone, the teaching is often



enshrined and forced into the confines of whatever labels are current among the surviving students. But Hui-neng's teaching was no teaching. So how could it be fast or slow, direct or indirect?

**Chih-ch'eng.** What little we know about Chih-ch'eng is based on his biography in Chapter Five of the *Chuantenglu*: "Transmission of the Lamp" published in 1004. And most of that account comes from the various editions of this sutra. The only difference is that the *Chuantenglu* says that after this encounter, Chih-ch'eng left to report back to Shen-hsiu but vowed to return.

**We'll see whose understanding is fast or slow, mine or Hui-neng's. And come back right away. Don't leave me hanging.** These lines are absent in the Tsungpao edition.

**Half a month.** This would have been difficult to accomplish, even on horseback. And any travel on water would have been upstream. In Section 11, we are told that it took Hui-neng nearly two months to go from the Fifth Patriarch Temple in Huangmei to Tayu Pass, which was about six hundred kilometers. But here Chih-ch'eng takes one-fourth the time to go nearly twice as far, as the distance from Yuchuan Temple to Tsaohsi was more than a thousand kilometers. This sort of inconsistency suggests that whoever added this section, and perhaps the remaining sections of this series, was not from this part of China.

**As soon as Chih-ch'eng heard the Master teach, he understood, and he grasped his original mind. He stood up and bowed and said, "Master, your disciple has come from**

**Yuchuan Temple. With Shen-hsiu, I didn't experience any realization. But as soon as I heard the Master speak, I grasped my original mind. I hope the Master will be compassionate enough to instruct me."** All of this is missing in the Tsungpao edition. In its place, there is this, apparently designed to demonstrate Hui-neng's spiritual powers: "The Master told the assembly, 'Someone is hiding in this assembly and has come to steal the Dharma.'"

**Chih-ch'eng said, "I'm not a spy." The Sixth Patriarch said, "And why not?"** These lines are missing in the Tunhuang Cave copy.

**The Sixth Patriarch said, "It's the same with 'affliction is enlightenment.'"** Hui-neng is quoting a statement that appears in a number of Mahayana texts. The mind that is afflicted and the mind that is enlightened are the same mind, our original mind, the mind we can't leave, and the mind that can't leave us. As long as we are unaware of our real mind, we are afflicted. And as soon as we are aware of our real mind, we are enlightened and no longer afflicted. The mind doesn't change. The only thing that changes is our awareness of the true nature of our affliction, which is no different from the true nature of enlightenment. This statement also appears in Section 26. Here, though, it is absent in the Tsungpao edition.

**Textual note:** This section appears near the beginning of Chapter Eight of the Tsungpao edition, where it follows the preceding section, but only after a few lines that do not appear in either Tunhuang edition: "Although Shen-hsiu's followers often criticized the patriarch of the Southern School for being illiterate

and for not having any great abilities, Shen-hsiu told them, ‘He has attained the wisdom that has no teacher, and he has a deep understanding of the Supreme Vehicle. I am not his equal. Also, my Master, the Fifth Patriarch, personally transmitted his robe and Dharma to him. How could that have been in vain? I regret not being able to make the long trip to see him and feel embarrassed at receiving the court’s favor. But none of you are tied down here. Why don’t you go visit him at Tsaohsi and decide for yourselves?’”

**41. The Master told Chih-ch’eng, “I’ve heard that when your Zen master teaches people, he only gives instruction in morality, meditation, and wisdom. Tell me, what does your master teach people about morality, meditation, and wisdom?”**

**Chih-ch’eng said, “Concerning morality, meditation, and wisdom, Master Shen-hsiu says not committing evil is morality, doing good is wisdom, and purifying one’s thoughts is meditation. This is what he means by ‘morality, meditation, and wisdom.’ This is his explanation. What is the Master’s view?”**

**Hui-neng replied, “This explanation is wonderful, but my view is different.”**

**Chih-ch’eng asked, “How is it different?”**

**Hui-neng replied, “Understanding can be fast or slow.”**

**Chih-ch’eng then asked the Master to explain his view of morality, meditation, and wisdom.**

**The Master said, “Listen to my explanation, and you’ll see how I view them. When the land of your mind is free**

of error; this is the morality of your own nature. When the land of your mind is free of confusion, this is the meditation of your own nature. When the land of your mind is free of ignorance, this is the wisdom of your own nature.”

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 of bigger minds. Once people realize their own nature, they don’t differentiate between morality, meditation, and wisdom.”

Chih-ch’eng said, “Could the Master please explain why they aren’t differentiated?”

The Master said, “Our nature is free of error; free of confusion, and free of ignorance. Prajna shines in every thought and is forever free of attributes. What is there to differentiate? Our nature is something we cultivate directly. It doesn’t have any intervening stages, so we don’t differentiate any.”

Chih-ch’eng bowed and did not leave Tsaohsi Mountain. He became a disciple and was never far from the Master’s side.

Hui-neng’s teaching is for those whose minds are free of self-imposed obstructions. Being free of obstructions, their minds are described as vast, like the sky. And like the sky, they are full of the light of prajna. And in the light of prajna, such distinctions as morality, meditation, and wisdom turn out to be artificial and unnecessarily counterproductive. It sounds like Hui-neng is being boastful, but he is just being his usual straightforward self. A lot of any teacher’s work amounts to clearing away the

detritus of the mind accumulated over many lifetimes. And in this work Hui-neng was a master.

**Morality, meditation, and wisdom.** These were called the *tri-skandha*, or Three Pillars, of early Buddhism. They are sometimes interpreted as three aspects of practice that concern our relationship to society, the body, and the mind. Their appearance here as encapsulating Shen-hsiu's teaching does not necessarily reflect the limits of his actual instruction and was probably aimed at associating him with the Lesser Vehicle of Hinayana Buddhism. Still, Shen-hsiu was much more conservative than Hui-neng in his teaching and is not unfairly portrayed here.

**He only gives instruction in morality, meditation, and wisdom.** Before this sentence, the Chisung and Tsungpao editions add this conversation: "The Master asked, 'How does your master instruct his assembly?' Chih-ch'eng replied, 'He always admonishes the assembly to stop their minds and meditate on stillness and to sit up all night without lying down.' The Master said, 'Stopping the mind and meditating on stillness are a disease, not Zen! And sitting up all night exhausts the body and does not benefit one's understanding.'"

**Master Shen-hsiu says not committing evil is morality, doing good is wisdom, and purifying one's thoughts is meditation.** This is just a restatement of a well-known saying in the *Dhammapada*: "Commit no wrongs, perform good deeds, and let your thoughts be pure. Thus do all buddhas teach," which, again, is a text associated with Hinayana Buddhism.

**This explanation is wonderful.** Before this line, the Tsungpao

edition has Hui-neng saying, “If I said I have a teaching that I give people, I would be deceiving you. All I do is liberate them by whatever means available, which is what I mean by ‘samadhi.’”

**How is it different?** Before this line, the Tsungpao edition has: “But there is only one kind of morality, meditation, and wisdom.”

**Understanding can be fast or slow.** At first reading, this doesn’t seem to answer Chih-ch’eng’s question. But it is really the basis for all of Hui-neng’s teachings.

**Land of your mind.** In the Chinese expression *hsin-ti*: “land of the mind,” the character *ti*: “land/ground” is usually understood as superfluous and more or less euphemistic, an attempt at imagery where there are no images.

**When the land of your mind is free of ignorance, this is the morality of your own nature.** This entire series is rendered as a non-rhyming five-line poem in the Tsungpao edition, which then adds these two lines: “Not increasing or decreasing, basically indestructible / whether coming or going always in samadhi.” The Tsungpao edition also adds a rhyming response by Chih-ch’eng, of which Hui-neng approves: “The skandhas form an illusory body / and how can an illusion last / now that I’ve returned to true suchness / let dharmas remain impure.”

**They don’t differentiate between morality, meditation, and wisdom.** Instead of “morality, meditation, and wisdom,” the Tsung-pao edition has this: “They don’t differentiate enlightenment and nirvana. They also don’t differentiate the knowledge of liberation. Only those who cannot find a single

dharma can differentiate the ten thousand dharmas. To understand this is also called the body of the buddha, enlightenment, nirvana, and the knowledge of liberation. Those who see their nature, differentiate and don't differentiate, come and go freely without restriction or hindrance. They manifest their apparition body by acting as the need arises and speaking as the occasion demands. They never leave their own nature and thus obtain mastery over spiritual powers and the exercise of samadhi. This is called seeing one's nature."

**Forever free of attributes.** After this, the Tsungpao edition adds: "free and independent with everything at our command."

**Our nature is something we cultivate directly. It doesn't have any intervening stages, so we don't differentiate any.** In the Huihsin, Chisung, and Tsungpao editions this has been changed to: "We realize our own nature. Direct realization is the direct practice. There are no indirect stages. So no dharmas are differentiated. The buddhas say, 'In nirvana, where are there any stages?'"

**Textual note:** Although it has been subject to considerable editing, most of which is noted above, this section appears in Chapter Eight of the Tsungpao edition, where it follows the preceding section.

**42. Another monk, named Fa-ta, had been reciting the *Lotus Sutra* for seven years but was bewildered as to its true teaching. So he went to Tsaohsi Mountain to pay his respects and asked the Master, "Your disciple has been**

reciting the *Lotus Sutra* for seven years, but I'm bewildered as to its true teaching, and I have some questions about the sutra. I was hoping the Master would use his vast wisdom to resolve them."

The Master said, "Fa-ta, the Dharma penetrates the depths, but not your mind. The sutra doesn't have any questions. It's your mind that has questions. You search for the true teaching with a confused mind, but I uphold the sutra because I practice true mindfulness. All my life I've never been able to read. But if you read the *Lotus* to me once, I'll understand as soon as I hear it."

Fa-ta then read the entire sutra to the Master. As soon as the Sixth Patriarch heard, he understood the Buddha's meaning and explained the *Lotus Sutra* to Fa-ta.

The Sixth Patriarch said, "The *Lotus Sutra* isn't that complicated. Its seven folios contain nothing but lessons in metaphor. The reason the Tathagata expanded his explanation to include the Three Vehicles was simply because people are slow to understand. But the sutra makes it clear that there is no other vehicle than the One Buddha Vehicle."

The Master said, "Fa-ta, pay attention to the One Buddha Vehicle. Don't go looking for the Two Buddha Vehicle and lose your own nature. And where in the sutra are you going to find the One Buddha Vehicle? I'll tell you. The sutra says, 'All buddhas and bhagavans only appear in the world as a result of the greatest of all causes.' How is this teaching to be understood? And how is this teaching to be practiced? Listen, and I will tell you.

When a person's mind has no thoughts and is fundamentally empty and still and free of false views, this



is the greatest of all causes—which occurs when you aren't confused about the inside or the outside, when you are free of dualities. If you're confused about the outside, you're attached to forms. If you're confused about the inside, you're attached to emptiness. To be free of form amid forms and to be free of emptiness amid emptiness, this is when you aren't confused about the inside or the outside.

If you want to use a sutra in your practice, it isn't like picking up an ordinary book. A sutra is a sacred text. It represents the teaching of a buddha. A mind full of mundane thoughts will only block the understanding of such a text. Thus, Hui-neng clears the rubble from Fa-ta's path and ours as well: Our mind is the One Buddha Vehicle. The One Buddha Vehicle contains no dualities, not even an alternate, backup buddha vehicle. The One Buddha Vehicle is just this mind of ours. And thus, the *Lotus Sutra* is also just this mind of ours.

The *Lotus* was one of the most studied and recited sutras in Huineng's day largely due to its status in Tientai Buddhism, with which Zen competed for adherents during the T'ang. Chih-yi, the founder of the Tientai sect, considered the *Lotus* to be the final and most perfect teaching of the Buddha. Like the *Nirvana Sutra*, it focuses its teaching on the buddha nature possessed by all beings, but it does so in a much more exuberant, all-encompassing manner.

**Fa-ta.** The Tsungpao edition has interpolated the biography of this monk from the *Transmission of the Lamp* (5): "Fa-ta was a native of Hungchou (ed. Nanchang, the capital of Kiangsi province). He left home at the age of seven and constantly recited the *Lotus Sutra*. When he came to pay his respects to

the Master, he failed to touch his forehead to the ground.

The Master reproached him, 'If you're not going to touch your head to the ground when you bow, why bow at all? There must be something on your mind. What have you been doing for your practice?'

He said, 'I've recited the *Lotus Sutra* three thousand times.'

The Master said, 'Even if you recited it ten thousand times and finally discovered the meaning of the sutra, only if you didn't consider this a great accomplishment would you walk the same path as me. Your accomplishment has blinded you to your own failing. Listen to my gatha: 'Bowing breaks down the obstruction of arrogance / so why did your head not touch the ground / possession of a self gives rise to sin / the merit of non-achievement is beyond compare.'

The Master then asked, 'What is your name?' Upon being told that it was Fa-ta, the Master said, 'Your name is Dharma-Penetration, but what dharma have you penetrated?' He then recited another gatha, 'Your name is Dharma Penetration / you recite with diligence and no rest / but reciting is vain if it is only sound / who knows their mind is a bodhisattva / because of our karmic connection / I will explain what it means / simply believe that buddhas don't speak / and lotuses will grow from your lips.'

When Fa-ta heard this, he repented and said, 'From now on, I will be humble at all times.'” From this point, the Tsungpao edition rejoins the Tunhuang edition with Fa-ta asking about the *Lotus Sutra*.

**So he went to Tsaohsi Mountain to pay his respects and asked the Master, “Your disciple has been reciting the *Lotus Sutra* for seven years, but I’m bewildered as to its true teaching.** This is absent in the Tunhuang Cave edition but

present in the Tunhuang Museum edition.

**I uphold the sutra because I practice true mindfulness.** The Tsung-pao edition omits this line and in its place has Fa-ta saying, “How could I possibly know the meaning? I’m simply too stupid and merely rely on reciting the words.”

**Fa-ta then read the entire sutra to the Master:** In the Chisung and Tsungpao editions, this is amended to “Fa-ta then chanted the sutra in a loud voice. When he reached the chapter on skillful means (ed. Chapter Two), the Master said, ‘Stop.’” No doubt, this change was intended to make the text sound more reasonable. Depending on the size of the type or the calligraphy, most editions of the *Lotus* are between two and three hundred pages in length. Thus, reciting the entire sutra, in a manner meant to be understood, would normally take half the day.

**Its seven folios contain nothing but lessons in metaphor.** In the Huihsin edition this has been changed to “its ten folios.” Of the three Chinese translations of the *Lotus Sutra* extant in the T’ang, two were in seven folios (and twenty-eight chapters), and one was in ten.

**Three Vehicles.** This refers to the division of the Buddha’s teaching based on distinctions among practitioners and their practice: shravakas, pratyeka-buddhas, and bodhisattvas. Shravakas seek liberation by cultivating the Buddha’s Four Noble Truths. In the *Lotus Sutra*, this is represented by the metaphor of the goat cart. Pratyeka-buddhas seek liberation by cultivating the Buddha’s Twelfefold Chain of Dependent

Origination. In the *Lotus Sutra*, this is represented by the metaphor of the deer cart. And bodhisattvas seek their own liberation and also the liberation of all beings by cultivating the Buddha's Six Perfections. In the *Lotus Sutra*, this is represented by the metaphor of the ox cart.

**One Buddha Vehicle.** This refers to the inclusion of all the Buddha's teachings in one vehicle. In the *Lotus Sutra*, this is represented by the metaphor of the cart drawn by a white ox.

**Two Buddha Vehicle.** This refers to any dualistic conception of enlightenment but especially to the practices associated with the shravakas and prateyeka-buddhas of Hinayana Buddhism.

**All buddhas and bhagavans only appear in the world as a result of the greatest of all causes.** (This quote is the true teaching.) This line is quoted from the *Lotus Sutra* (2). The words in parentheses appear in all editions of the *Platform Sutra* and must have been written in the margin of an early copy of the text and retained by subsequent copyists.

**How is this teaching to be understood? And how is this teaching to be practiced? Listen, and I will tell you. When a person's mind has no thoughts and is fundamentally empty and still and free of false views, this is the greatest of all causes.** This series of lines is not present in the Tsungpao edition.

**Once you understand this teaching, your mind will develop in an instant. But what does the mind develop when it appears in the world? It develops the**

understanding of a buddha. *Buddha* means ‘enlightenment.’ And this can be divided into four doorways: developing the understanding of enlightenment, manifesting the understanding of enlightenment, realizing the understanding of enlightenment, and entering the understanding of enlightenment. Developing, manifesting, realizing, and entering all begin from one place, from the understanding of enlightenment. When you see your own nature, you will appear in the world.”

The Master said, “Fa-ta, I keep hoping that in their minds everyone in the world will develop the understanding of a buddha and not the understanding of an ordinary being. When people’s minds are mistaken, they foolishly engage in evil and develop the understanding of an ordinary being. And when people’s minds are true, they give rise to the light of wisdom and develop the understanding of a buddha. When you don’t develop the understanding of an ordinary being but the understanding of a buddha, that is when you will appear in the world.”

The Master said, “Fa-ta, this is the *Lotus Sutra*’s teaching of One Vehicle, which it then divides into three for the sake of deluded people. But you should only take refuge in the One Buddha Vehicle.”

The Master said, “Fa-ta, 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 develop the understanding of a buddha, you read the *Lotus*. When you develop 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 Fa-ta 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 buddhas.”

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

The greatest of all causes is the appearance of our own minds. This is a cause worth working for. This mind of ours is the same as the mind of all buddhas. Sutras can help show us how to find this mind of ours. But we can also get lost in sutras. Hui-neng shows us how to use a sutra to develop the awareness of this mind of ours rather than let the sutras use us. The way to use a sutra is to look past the language to the meaning. And the meaning of every sutra is the same. Every sutra is about our buddha nature. The language, the metaphors, the structure, the logic of every sutra is different. But the message is the same. The only reason the Buddha spoke was to lead others to share the same understanding, the understanding of enlightenment. When someone develops the understanding of enlightenment, a buddha appears in the world.

**But what does the mind develop when it appears in the world?** This is absent in the Tsungpao edition. The Chinese *ch'u-shih*: “to appear in the world” can also mean “to transcend

the world.” Here, however, the expression is quoted from Chapter Two in the *Lotus Sutra*, where the former meaning is stressed.

**Four doorways: developing the understanding of enlightenment, manifesting the understanding of enlightenment, realizing the understanding of enlightenment, and entering the understanding of enlightenment.** After this sentence, the Tsungpao edition rambles on with this digression: “Once you know about developing and manifesting, you will be able to realize and enter. This is the understanding of enlightenment and our original true nature, which we can manifest. You must not mistake the meaning of the sutra and say, “When he (ed. the Buddha) talks about development, manifestation, realization, and entering, this is the understanding of buddhas and has nothing to do with us.” If this is how you understand this, you are criticizing the sutras and slandering the buddhas. You yourself are a buddha, and your understanding is complete. Why do you now need to develop it? What you need to do is believe that a buddha’s understanding is just your own mind. There is no other buddha.

Of course, it’s because beings cover up their own light and lust after sensation that they’re attached on the outside and confused on the inside and they’re quite happy to go running around. But it was this that caused the Bhagavan to rise up from samadhi (ed. at Bodh Gaya) and to use every kind of exhortation to make others stop and not seek outside themselves but realize that they are no different from buddhas. Thus, we say to develop the understanding of a buddha.

I, too, urge everyone in their own minds and at all times to develop the understanding of a buddha. But people’s minds are deluded, and they keep acting bad. Their mouths speak of

goodness, but their minds think of evil. In their greed, anger, jealousy, deceit, and arrogance, they confront and hurt others, and they develop the understanding of ordinary beings. If you can correct your thoughts and give rise to wisdom and illuminate your own mind and stop doing evil and do good, you will develop the understanding of a buddha.

Thought after thought, you must develop the understanding of a buddha. Don't develop the understanding of an ordinary being. To develop the understanding of a buddha is to transcend the world (ed. In this case, *ch'u-shih* does not mean "to appear in the world"). To develop the understanding of an ordinary being is to be in the world. If you only work hard and think you are doing something, you're no different from an ox in love with its tail.'

Fa-ta said, 'If that's the case, then all we have to do is to understand the meaning. We don't need to recite the sutra?'

The Master said, 'Don't blame the sutra for obstructing your thoughts. Delusion and realization are up to each person. Success and failure are up to you. If you chant it with your mouth and practice it with your mind, this is to read the sutra. If you recite it with your mouth but don't practice it with your mind, you are recited by the sutra. Listen to my gatha: "If the mind is deluded, the *Lotus* does the reading / if the mind is enlightened, you read the *Lotus* / reciting the sutra without understanding / you end up estranged from the meaning / to think no thought is the way / to think about thoughts is to go astray / don't be attached to thoughts or no thought / take the reins of the white ox cart.'"

**When you see your own nature, you will appear in the world.** As noted above, Hui-neng is using the expression *ch'u-*



*shih* as it is used in the *Lotus Sutra*, where it means “to appear in the world.”

**With each thought I shall practice the practice of buddhas.**

In the Chisung and Tsungpao editions, Fa-ta continues with the following gatha: “I chanted the sutra three thousand times / one phrase at Tsaohsi and all was forgotten / not knowing the meaning of appearing in the world / how could I give up lifetimes of madness / the sheep, deer, and ox cart enticements / the lure of beginning, middle and end / who would guess inside the burning house / the King of Dharmas dwells.”

**Textual note:** This section appears near the beginning of Chapter Seven in the Tsungpao edition, where it follows a short section involving the editor, Fa-hai, which is absent in both Tunhuang copies. Readers can find a translation of this missing text in the Appendix.

**43. One time a monk named Chih-ch’ang came to Tsaohsi Mountain. After paying his respects to the Master, he asked about the meaning of the Four Vehicles.**

**Chih-ch’ang said, “The Buddha speaks of the Three Vehicles, but he also talks about the Supreme Vehicle. Your disciple doesn’t understand this and would appreciate your instruction.”**

**Master Hui-neng said, “Look at your own mind, and don’t cling to the external attributes of dharmas. Originally there was no teaching about the Four Vehicles. But because the capacity of the human mind has four levels, the Dharma has the 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, avoiding nothing except the attributes of dharmas, and remaining free of attainments make up the Supreme Vehicle. The meaning of the Supreme Vehicle consists in the supreme practice. It isn't something to discuss. You have to practice it. Don't ask me about it."**

Originally there are no teachings. Teachings arise in response to ignorance and delusion. In a world of enlightened beings, Shakyamuni would have never left the forest, much less home. But he lived, and we still live, in a world whose very fabric is based on the suffering of others. Hence, he traded the luxury of a palace and the shade of a fig tree to spend his life walking from town to town, teaching liberation from suffering. And the teachings that make up the *Lotus Sutra* are considered by many Buddhists to be his greatest legacy. The text itself was probably compiled from a handful of shorter texts just before the beginning of the Christian Era, and the sutra was first translated into Chinese around the middle of the third century. By Hui-neng's time, it had given rise to several schools of Buddhism, and it was read and recited and depicted in art all over China.

Basically, the *Lotus Sutra* addresses the three most commonly encountered delusions among Buddhists and points beyond their provisional states of salvation to the universal buddhahood of all beings. Although the high-flown language and cosmic teaching of the *Lotus* have had their advocates among Zen masters, most have preferred to teach with materials closer at hand. And if they used sutras at all in their instruction, they

have usually relied on the *Lankavatara*, the *Diamond*, the *Heart*, the *Vimalakirti*, and the *Complete Enlightenment Sutras*. Still, the *Lotus* was considered the greatest of all sutras by the Tientai sect. And the Tientai sect had a major impact on the early development of Zen. Hence, it is no surprise that a devotee of this text should approach Hui-neng for an explanation.

**Chih-ch'ang.** According to the *Transmission of the Lamp* (5), Chihch'ang was from a small town in the northeast corner of what is now Kiangsi province. He left home when he was still in his teens and became a disciple of Hui-neng following this meeting. The only other information we have about him is limited to what can be gleaned from the additional dialogue found in Chapter Seven of the Tsung-pao edition and which I have placed in the Appendix.

**Four Vehicles.** The teaching of the Four Vehicles in the *Lotus Sutra* (3) became a basic part of the Tientai teaching, which saw the teaching of the Small, Middle, and Great Vehicles as provisional teachings that prepare practitioners for the Ekayana, or One Vehicle. **Supreme Vehicle.** In the *Lotus Sutra*, this is called the One Vehicle or the Buddha Vehicle. As Hui-neng notes at the end of this section, it doesn't refer to anything or mean anything. It is just our daily practice.

**Small Vehicle.** Shravakas, or followers of the Hinayana path, observe what a buddha does and listen to what a buddha says, and they read and recite the words left behind by a buddha. But they fail to observe or listen to their own minds, much less depend on their own words.

**Middle Vehicle.** Pratyeka-buddhas, or followers of the Madhyayana path, analyze the mind into its constituent dharmas and consider their nature and relationships. But they fail to see the forest for the trees, much less see the mountain.

**Great Vehicle.** Bodhisattvas, or followers of the Mahayana path, put the teachings of buddhas into practice. But they tend to follow the footsteps of others and fail to establish their own path. Hence, they do not necessarily acknowledge, much less see, their own nature.

**Avoiding nothing except the attributes of dharmas.** The expression *fa-hsiang*: “attributes of dharmas” is a Chinese translation of the Sanskrit *dharma-lakshana* and refers to the analysis of mind in discrete entities. This was the major focus of the Fahsiang/Dharma-lakshana School, founded by Hsuan-tsang and his Korean disciple, Wonchuk, which advocated the contemplation of dharmas, both as to their nature and their attributes. This school was also based on the *Lotus Sutra*, which is why this interview is placed after the preceding one. In the Tsungpao edition, this sentence is somewhat different: “avoiding the attributes of dharmas and not being affected by anything.”

**Don’t ask me.** Where’s that pot of tea when you need it? In the Tsungpao edition, Hui-neng continues, “‘At all times, your own nature is reality itself.’ Chih-ch’ang thanked Hui-neng and served as his attendant until the Master’s death.”

**Textual note:** This section appears in Chapter Seven of the Tsungpao edition, where it follows the preceding section, but

only after two intervening sections not present in either Tunhuang edition. The first involves Chih-t'ung, and the second is another incident involving Chih-ch'ang. Also, following Section 43, there is a long series of additional sections in the Tsungpao edition absent in both Tunhuang editions involving the disciples Chih-tao, Hsing-ssu, Huai-jang, Hsuan-chiao, Chih-huang, Fang-pien, and an unnamed monk. I have included a translation of these missing materials in the Appendix.

**44. There was another monk by the name of Shen-hui. He was from Nanyang. And when he came to Tsaohsi Mountain to pay his respects, he asked, "When the Master meditates, does he see or not?"**

**The Master got up and hit Shen-hui three times. Then he asked Shen-hui, "When I hit you, did it hurt or not?"**

**Shen-hui answered, "It hurt and it didn't hurt."**

**The Sixth Patriarch said, "Well, I see and I don't see."**

**Shen-hui asked the Master again, "What do you mean, you see and you don't see?"**

**The Master said, "As for 'I see,' what I always 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 on earth or in heaven. So I see and I don't see. What do you mean, 'It hurt and it didn't hurt'?"**

**Shen-hui answered, "If it didn't hurt, I would be the same as a lifeless stick or a rock. And if it hurt, I would be the same as an ordinary person still subject to anger."**

**The Master said, "Shen-hui, this 'do you see or not' just now was dualistic, but 'it hurt and it didn't hurt' was sansaric. You don't see your own nature, and yet you dare**

**to come here and play games.”**

**Shen-hui bowed and didn't dare say anything more. So the Master said, “If you're too deluded to see your own mind, ask a good friend to help you find the way. Only when you understand and see your own mind will you put the Dharma into practice. But you're too deluded to see your own mind. And now you've 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 mine? Why don't you practice, then ask me if I see or not?”**

**Shen-hui bowed and became a disciple. He didn't leave Tsaohsi Mountain and was always in attendance.**

Encounters like this fill dozens of Zen records from the T'ang and Sung dynasties. But this appears to have been the first such account in which a Zen master gives someone a place to stand then takes it away. It's ironic that this first recorded Zen exchange, and the only one in this sutra, involves a thirteen-year-old boy. Of course, this was no ordinary teenager but someone who would play a major role in elevating Hui-neng, and this text as well, above all other pretenders to the high altar of Zen.

In Part One (Sections 1-11), we are introduced to Hui-neng's development as a teacher. In Part Two (Sections 12-37), we encounter his basic teaching. And in Part Three (Sections 38-44), we see Hui-neng together with his students. This part must have seemed a bit thin to later editors. Thus, as time went on, additional accounts were edited into the sutra to introduce us to a broader range of themes, as well as disciples. But the basic theme has now been established, which is that of Hui-neng's role as a transmitter of Zen, not only to an audience numbering in the

thousands, but to an audience of one.

**Shen-hui.** According to his biography in the *Transmission of the Lamp* and the text of the Tsungpao edition, Shen-hui was thirteen when he met Hui-neng. The date of his birth remains a moot point. Some say it was as early as 668. Others put it as late as 686. After Huineng's death in 713, Shen-hui moved to Nanyang and stayed there for a number of years, then moved to the capital of Loyang to promote Hui-neng as the true heir of the Fifth Patriarch. He was subsequently banished but later rehabilitated, and he ended his days in the highest imperial esteem. He died around 760. It was Shen-hui who came up with the idea of a Northern School of Zen, whose patriarch was Shen-hsiu and whose teaching promoted indirect understanding by stages, and a Southern School of Zen, whose patriarch was Hui-neng and whose teaching advocated direct understanding.

In the Tsungpao edition, this section begins with this introductory material: "A thirteen-year-old boy named Shen-hui, a child of the Kao family in Hsiangyang, came from Yuchuan Temple to pay his respects. The Master said, 'Learned friend, you have gone to great trouble to come from so far away. Have you brought something of your own with you? If you have, then it's time you met the owner. Go ahead, say something.' Shen-hui said, 'Because what belongs to me is non-attachment, what I see is the owner.' The Master said, 'What is this novice doing trading barbs with me?'" The Tsungpao edition then continues with the present text.

**Nanyang.** This is a city in central China near the headwaters of the Huai River about 200 kilometers south of Loyang. The Tsungpao edition and also the *Transmission of the Lamp* (5) give Shen-hui's hometown as Hsiangyang, another 150

kilometers southwest of Nanyang, on the Han River. He spent time in both after Hui-neng's death, but the consensus is that Nanyang was his hometown.

**The Master got up and hit Shen-hui.** The Tsungpao edition specifies that Hui-neng hit Shen-hui with his staff.

**Three times.** The first time, the staff is a staff. The second time, the staff is not a staff. The third time, the staff is, after all, just a staff. Whack!

**Shen-hui answered, "If it didn't hurt, I would be the same as a lifeless stick or a rock. And if it hurt, I would be the same as an ordinary person still subject to anger."** In the Tsungpao edition, these remarks are attributed to Hui-neng and aimed at Shen-hui: for example, "If it didn't hurt, you would be . . ."

**Dualistic . . . sansaric.** A dualistic dharma makes a dichotomy of what is essentially a unity: black and white, yes and no, right and wrong. *Sansara* means "birth and death." A sansaric dharma isn't just dualistic, it keeps us tied to the Wheel of Existence.

**What I don't know can't take the place of your ignorance. And how can what you understand take the place of mine?** Some commentators have wondered if there might be a problem with the text here. In the Huihsin, Chisung, and Tsungpao editions, these lines are rendered: "I myself know what I see, but how can it take the place of your ignorance? And whatever it is you see, it can't take the place of my ignorance." The difference is whether there is a negative in the first phrase: Should we read



“what I don’t know” or “what I know”?

**Didn’t leave Tsaohsi Mountain.** Shen-hui remained with Hui-neng for about twenty years, or until his master’s death in 713. Shortly after that, he left and never returned to Tsaohsi.

After this line, the Chisung and Tsungpao editions add this: “One day the Master told the assembly, ‘I have something that has no head or tail, no name or identity, and no front or back. Do any of you recognize it?’

Shen-hui stepped forward and said, ‘It’s the origin of all buddhas. It’s my buddha nature.’

The Master said, ‘I told you it has no name or identity. But you’ve used the names “origin” and “buddha nature.” Even if you’ve managed to keep a roof of thatch over your head, you’re just a book-worm.’

Later, when Shen-hui entered the capital of Loyang, he spread the direct teaching of Tsaohsi everywhere, and his *Hsientsung Record* became known throughout the world. When the Master (ed. Shen-hui) saw that a number of followers of other sects had gathered before him to question him with evil intent, he took pity on them and said, ‘Those who study the Way should get rid of good thoughts as well as bad thoughts. What cannot be named by a name is what we call our nature. The nature that has no equal is what we call our true nature. All schools are based on this true nature of ours. But you have to see it right now.’ When they heard this, they all bowed and asked how they might serve the Master.”

**Textual note:** This section appears at the end of Chapter Eight in the Tsungpao edition, where it follows Section 41, but only after an intervening section not present in either Tunhuang copy

involving Chih-ch'e, which I have moved to the Appendix.

## **PART IV (SECTIONS 45-57)**

**45. The Master later summoned his disciples Fa-hai, Chih-ch'eng, Fa-ta, Chih-ch'ang, Chih-t'ung, Chih-ch'e, Chih-tao, Fa-chen, Fa-ju, and Shen-hui and said, "You ten disciples come closer. You're not like the others. After I pass into Nirvana, each of you will lead a congregation, so I will teach you how to explain the Dharma without losing sight of its basic principle.**

**Begin with the teaching of the Three Classifications and make use of the Thirty-six Pairs. But in whatever you state or imply, avoid dualities. Whenever you explain any dharma, don't depart from its nature and attributes. And whenever someone asks you about a dharma, always speak in terms of pairs and hold up its opposite. Since each depends on the other for its existence or non-existence, both dharmas are eventually eliminated, and there is nowhere left 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? These 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? These include the Six Realms of Sensation, the Six Senses, and the Six Kinds of Consciousness.**

**What do the Twelve Ayatanas include? These include**

**the Six Realms of Sensation externally and the Six Senses internally.**

**What do the Six Realms of Sensation include? These include shape, sound, smell, taste, feeling, and thought.**

**What do the Six Senses include? These include the eyes, the ears, the nose, the tongue, the body, and the intellect.**

**In addition to the Six Senses and the Six Realms of Sensation, our dharma nature gives rise to the Six Kinds of Consciousness: eye consciousness, ear consciousness, nose consciousness, tongue consciousness, body consciousness, and mind consciousness.**

**Because our nature includes ten thousand dharmas, we also call it the Storehouse Consciousness. When we think, we alter our consciousness and give rise to the Six Kinds of Consciousness, which leave through the Six Senses and encounter the Six Realms of Sensation. These three sets of six make eighteen.**

**When our nature is false, it gives rise to eighteen kinds of falsehood. When our nature is true, it gives rise to eighteen kinds of truth. Who uses them for evil is an ordinary being. Who uses them for good is a buddha. And where does such usage come from? From our nature.**

Hui-neng's teaching never goes beyond what we find at hand, namely, this very nature of ours. In Section 52, he says, "Listen, if the deluded people of future generations can simply understand what a sentient being is, they'll be able to see a buddha." Here, he summarizes the basic conceptual schemes for analyzing a sentient being used since the time of the Buddha. And he reminds his leading disciples how his approach is

connected to the basic psychology that is the Abhidharma. Many commentators have been mystified by the inclusion of this and the following section and have suggested that they don't belong in a Zen text. But during Hui-neng's day, Zen had not yet cut itself off from the use of what were still considered the standard approaches to the analysis of the mind. Slapping people around was still half a century away. As was that cup of tea.

The earliest sermons of the Buddha, in both the Theravada and Mahayana canons, contain hundreds, even thousands, of talks about these different schemes that later became the basis of the Abhidharma. It's important to keep in mind that each was designed to deal with a different kind of psychological impasse.

The scheme of the Five Skandhas was intended for people whose view of reality and whose questions concerning their place in it stressed the mind as opposed to matter, as four of the five categories concern what we think of as our internal world. The Twelve Ayatanas were for those whose existential dilemma involved the external world, with which ten of its twelve categories are concerned. And the Eighteen Dhatus were for those concerned about both, as ten of its categories concern the external world and eight concern the internal world.

These three approaches are simply different ways of classifying any experience we might have into a set of constituent parts. All three were derived from an earlier Indian scheme that divided our awareness into an inside and an outside (*nama-rupa*). Apparently, this was just too simple for most people, and the additional categories were developed to make people think that they are more complex than they actually are. And, of course, this is what Hui-neng wants his disciples to keep in mind: If you engage in such analysis, don't become attached to the

terms used to break through our existential dilemma, lest they become the source of a further dilemma.

**Summoned his disciples.** In enjoining his disciples to go forth and spread the word, Hui-neng did not claim the support of divine providence. Hui-neng was just a human being, but a human being whose understanding and manifestation of the true nature of existence have inspired the veneration and emulation of hundreds of millions of people around the world.

In Section 38, the editor tells us that Hui-neng had between three thousand and five thousand disciples. The *Transmission of the Lamp* (5) lists forty-three of these by name. And of this number, it supplies brief biographies for nineteen, including eight of the ten disciples listed here. I think it's fairly safe to say that by the time this text, or this edition of this text, was compiled, these ten had achieved a certain amount of success as teachers in their own right. And their inclusion here suggests that this section was added in the decades immediately after Hui-neng's death in 713.

**Fa-hai.** He was the compiler of this edition of the sutra and was from the town of Chuchiang, where Tsaohsi Mountain was located. One day he asked Hui-neng to explain the statement "This mind is the buddha." Hui-neng answered, "When the next thought doesn't appear, that is the mind. When the last thought doesn't disappear, that is the Buddha. What creates all forms is the mind. What is free of all forms is the Buddha. A kalpa wouldn't be long enough to explain this completely."

**Chih-ch'eng.** He was from Chichou (Chi-an), in the upper reaches of the Kan River watershed. After studying with Shen-

hsiu, he traveled south to Tsaohsi Mountain at the request of his teacher. For his encounter with Hui-neng, see Sections 40 and 41.

**Fa-ta.** He was from Hungchou (Nanchang), the capital of Kiangsi province, and left home when he was only seven. For his encounter with Hui-neng, see Section 42.

**Chih-ch'ang.** He was from Shangjao in northeastern Kiangsi province, and he also left home when he was quite young. For his encounter with Hui-neng, see Section 43.

**Chih-t'ung.** He was from Shouchou, near Huainan, in northeastern Anhui province. Having read the *Lankavatara Sutra* a thousand times without understanding the meaning of the Three Bodies or the Four Kinds of Knowledge, he traveled to Tsaohsi Mountain and asked Hui-neng about this. And Hui-neng told him, "The pure dharma body is your nature. The perfect realization body is your knowledge. The myriadfold manifestation body is your activity. If you claim the Three Bodies exist outside of your nature, this would be like having a body without any knowledge. And if you think the Four Kinds of Knowledge exist apart from the Three Bodies, this would be like having knowledge without a body." Chapter Seven of the Tsungpao edition includes an encounter between Chih-t'ung and Hui-neng, which is absent in both Tunhuang copies, but which I have translated in the Appendix.

**Chih-ch'e.** He was from Kiangsi province and was adept at using a sword. According to his biography in the *Transmission of the Lamp* (5), he was hired by supporters of the Northern

School to assassinate Hui-neng. But when he entered Hui-neng's chamber, his sword failed to leave a mark on Hui-neng, much less draw blood. He later returned to Tsaohsi and became one of Hui-neng's leading disciples. For his encounter with Hui-neng, which appears in Chapter Seven of the Tsungpao edition, see the Appendix.

**Chih-tao.** He was from the southern port city of Kuangchou. After reading the *Nirvana Sutra* a dozen times, he asked Hui-neng what it meant. Hui-neng told him, "Respond to your senses without giving rise to thoughts about responding. Discriminate dharmas without giving rise to thoughts about discriminating. The kalpa of fire that burns up the ocean, the wind that blows down the mountains, the everlasting and utterly empty joy of nirvana is like this." For his encounter with Hui-neng, which also appears in Chapter Seven of the Tsungpao edition, see the Appendix.

**Fa-chen.** No information available.

**Fa-ju.** No information available.

**Shen-hui.** See Section 44 above.

**Come closer:** This is absent in the Tsungpao edition.

**Pass into Nirvana.** Nirvana means the end of karma and the absence of rebirth.

**You're not like the others.** This reads like another example of insecurity among Hui-neng's disciples, or at least the students of his disciples.



**Don't depart from its nature and attributes.** This was the standard approach of analysis among Buddhists: to break down dharmas into their essential nature and their attributes. The Tsungpao edition replaces *hsing-hsiang*: “nature and attributes” with *t'zu-hsing*: “own nature.”

**Dharma nature.** This is another way of referring to our buddha nature or to suchness. By calling it “dharma nature,” Hui-neng emphasizes its function as the source of all dharmas.

**In addition to the Six Senses and the Six Realms of Sensation, our dharma nature gives rise to the Six Kinds of Consciousness: eye consciousness, ear consciousness, nose consciousness, tongue consciousness, body consciousness, and mind consciousness.** This is absent in the Tsungpao edition.

**Because our nature includes ten thousand dharmas, we also call it the Storehouse Consciousness.** This usage is from the *Lankavatara Sutra*.

**When we think.** In the *Lankavatara*, this is the Seventh Consciousness, while the Storehouse Consciousness is the eighth.

**These three sets of six make eighteen.** After this line, the Tsungpao edition adds: “They all derive their use from our nature.”

**Textual note:** This section appears at the beginning of Chapter Ten in the Tsungpao edition.

**46. As for the pairs of opposites, there are five pairs concerning external, inanimate states: heaven and earth, sun and moon, dark and light, yin and yang, water and fire.**

**There are twelve pairs concerning language and the attributes of dharmas: conditioned and unconditioned, material and immaterial, apparent and non-apparent, karmic and non-karmic, substantial and empty, moving and still, pure and defiled, mundane and holy, cleric and lay, old and young, long and short, high and low.**

**There are nineteen pairs concerning the functions arising from our nature: false and true, ignorant and learned, foolish and wise, confused and calm, right and wrong, straight and crooked, full and empty, biased and unbiased, afflicted and enlightened, kind and harmful, joyful and angry, detached and possessive, forward and backward, created and destroyed, permanent and impermanent, dharma body and physical body, manifestation body and realization body, substance and function, nature and attribute, animate and inanimate.**

**Language and the attributes of dharmas include twelve pairs. External, inanimate states include five pairs. And functions arising from our nature include nineteen pairs. Altogether they form thirty-six pairs. This teaching of Thirty-six Pairs can be used to explain every sutra, as long as you avoid dualities. But how are you to use these thirty-six pairs in regard to your nature?**

**In speaking with others, remain free of appearances when you explore appearances, and remain free of emptiness when you enter into emptiness. If you become attached to emptiness, you will only increase your**

**ignorance. And if you become attached to appearances, you will only increase your delusions.**

**And you slander the Dharma if you simply tell people not to use words. If you tell them not to use words, then people shouldn't use language. Language is words. You can say their nature is empty, but the nature of truth is not empty. The deluded only confuse themselves when they get rid of language.**

**Dark isn't itself dark. It's due to light that it's dark. And light isn't itself light. It's due to dark that it's light. Because light changes into dark, and dark gives rise to light, their appearance and disappearance depend on each other. The Thirty-six Pairs are all like this."**

Every teaching comes down to words. But words can turn into a jungle from which we can never find our way out, or words can set us free. Here, Hui-neng lists a series of words that represent his own unique alternative to the more traditional Abhidharma categories listed in the previous sections. But he presents his alternative system in pairs so that those who use them will avoid stressing any one word (and the concept that goes with it) without also acknowledging its relationship with its opposite. His hope is that through the interplay between any given pair, we are more likely to get free of them both by realizing the arbitrary nature of the distinctions we make between them. And if we are able to get free of words, we are more likely to get free of the concepts they represent.

Also noteworthy is Hui-neng's critique of those who think the Dharma, especially the teaching of Zen, has nothing to do with words. This was already misunderstood in his own day, and it continues to confound both teachers and students of Zen. There

are buddhalands in which buddhas teach with aromas and others in which they teach with gestures. But here in this buddhaland, they mostly rely on words. And they rely on words because our suffering is so intimately connected with words.

**There are twelve pairs concerning language and the attributes of dharmas.** The Huihsin, Chisung, and Tsungpao editions begin this series (of thirteen, not twelve, pairs) with “language and dharmas, existence and non-existence” and delete “conditioned and unconditioned . . . long and short, high and low.”

**There are nineteen pairs concerning the functions arising from our nature.** The Huihsin, Chisung, and Tsungpao editions add the pairs of “long and short” and the pairs of “compassion and malice.” In place of these two pairs, the Tunhuang copies both add three pairs: “substance and function,” “nature and attribute,” “animate and inanimate.” Of course, this makes twenty pairs, but apparently the editor wasn’t counting.

**Language and the attributes of dharmas include twelve pairs. External, inanimate states include five pairs. And functions arising from our nature include nineteen pairs. Altogether they form thirty-six pairs. This teaching of Thirty-six Pairs can be used to explain every sutra, as long as you avoid dualities. But how are you to use these thirty-six pairs in regard to your own nature?** These lines are missing in the Tsungpao edition.

**Language is words.** Although Hui-neng stresses the proper use of words as his parting instruction to his disciples, in the

*Lankavatara Sutra* (76), the Buddha tells Mahamati, “If people say a tathagata’s teaching is dependent on language, they are mistaken. Teaching transcends language. Neither I nor any other buddha or bodhisattva utters a single word. Everything we teach transcends language. But what we teach accords with the discriminations of beings. If we did not speak, our teaching would come to an end.

Therefore, Mahamati, fearless bodhisattvas are not attached to language and teach according to what is appropriate. Because the aspirations and afflictions of beings are not the same, buddhas teach different teachings so that beings can get free of the mind, so that they can realize everything is a manifestation of the mind and without existence outside of the mind, and so that they can abandon dualistic thinking. Mahamati, fearless bodhisattvas depend on meaning and not on words. If a noble son or daughter depends on words, they stray from the truth, and they cause others to stray.”

In the Tsungpao edition, this is followed by a lengthy digression before resuming with an edited version of the last paragraph.

**Textual note:** This section appears in Chapter Ten of the Tsungpao edition, where it follows the preceding section.

**47. The Master said, “Henceforth, when you ten disciples transmit the Dharma, hand down the teaching of the *Platform Sutra* without losing sight of its basic principle. Unless someone has been given the *Platform Sutra*, they do not have my teaching. And now that you have obtained it, pass it on to later generations. For to encounter the**

***Platform Sutra* is the same as being taught by me personally.”**

After these ten monks had been so instructed, they copied out the *Platform Sutra* and passed it on to later generations. Those who obtain it are sure to see their nature.

This sutra was compiled by Hui-neng's closest disciples, and these last two parts of the text must have been based on their personal records or memories. If we read this section literally, it suggests that the compilation of this text, or at least an earlier version of it, might have even taken place during Hui-neng's lifetime and that he then authenticated it and handed it back to those who had contributed to its composition. And once they received it back, these ten monks then began the process of making copies so that they could pass it on to others and, no doubt, were responsible for adding to it.

Also worth noting in this section is that the transmission of Huineng's teaching is connected to a text and not simply to the wordless, mind-to-mind instruction that Zen would later become famous for. No doubt, this emphasis on a text was also linked to the struggle among different factions as to who represented the authentic teaching that Bodhidharma brought to China.

**Basic principle.** As stated elsewhere, Hui-neng's basic principle is to know your mind and to see your nature.

**Copied.** Hui-neng died in 713, but the earliest printed book that has yet come to light—the *Diamond Sutra*—did not appear until 868. Hence, the early transmission of this text required handwritten copies, like the two found in the Tunhuang Caves.

Although this is not one of the longer texts in the Buddhist Canon, it still contains well over ten thousand characters. Thus, copying it out by hand was a laborious, though meritorious, process. But it was a process that allowed those who were passing it on to examine and authenticate the understanding of those to whom they gave it. Nowadays, there are no such restrictions on the transmission of this text. Anyone can have Hui-neng for their teacher.

**Textual note:** This section appears in Chapter Ten of the Tsungpao edition, where it is inserted between the two parts that make up Section 49.

**48. The Master passed into Nirvana on the third day of the eighth month in the second year of the Hsientung Era. On the eighth day of the seventh month, he called his disciples together to say good-bye. In the first year of the Hsientung Era, he built a stupa at Kuo-en Temple in Hsinchou. And 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 answer them for you. Let me put an end to your delusions so that you can know joy. After I leave, there will be no one to teach you.”

When Fa-hai and the other monks heard this, they wept and cried. Only Shen-hui was unmoved and shed no tears. The Sixth Patriarch said, “Shen-hui is a young monk, but he understands that the good and the bad are the same, and he isn’t moved by praise or blame. The rest of you

**don't understand. What exactly have you been practicing all these years in the mountains? And who exactly are you crying for? Are you worried that I don't know where I'm going? If I didn't know where I was going, I would never leave you. You're crying because you don't know where I'm going. If you knew, you wouldn't be crying.**

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

It is not uncommon for people in close touch with the karmic forces that keep them alive to have a premonition of when those forces will dissipate and their lives end. The year before he died, Hui-neng left Tsaohsi Mountain and went back to his family home and built a stupa for his parents. Some of his disciples accompanied him there, and he now asks if they have any questions before he leaves them. Since they're too overcome with grief to think of anything to ask, he leaves them with one last poem. As for where he is going, in the *Diamond Sutra* (29), the Buddha tells Subhuti, "Those who are called tathagatas do not go anywhere, nor do they come from anywhere. Thus are they called tathagatas, arhans, fully enlightened ones."

**Nirvana.** When early Buddhists analyzed reality into its constituent parts, or dharmas, this was one of two dharmas set aside as not dependent on other dharmas. The other unconditioned dharma was space. *Nirvana* was the term used by Buddhists for that state where karma and the passion that



gives rise to it come to an end. Thus, it means an end to rebirth. The use of this term here was probably part of the effort by Hui-neng's disciples, or the editor of this text, to elevate their teacher to the status of a buddha.

**Third day of the . . . Hsientung Era.** In the Gregorian Calendar, this was August 28, 713. The Hsientung Era marked the first two years of the reign of Emperor Hsuan-tsung (r. 712-755). This was followed by the Kaiyuan Era, which lasted from 713 until 742.

**Stupa.** This architectural form was first used in India to enclose the remains of deceased teachers and to provide a place for worship. Some stupas in China are so large, they have staircases inside leading to the top and are more properly called "pagodas." Others are only a few feet high and made of solid earth or bricks. This one was seven stories high, with a balcony encircling each story. It has been renovated and still stands, not far from a lichee tree that Hui-neng planted and that still bears fruit every summer.

**Kuo-en Temple.** This temple was built on the site of Hui-neng's family home in 707. And this is where he returned in 712. The temple is located twelve kilometers south of the town of Hsinhsing, which was called Hsinchou in the T'ang dynasty.

**Shen-hui is a young monk.** According to most sources, Shen-hui was forty-four when Hui-neng died. Others, in keeping with this reference, say he was twenty-six. In either case, this was probably added later, perhaps even after Shen-hui's death, to raise his stature and provide some support for his attacks on the

Northern School.

**I would never leave you.** The Tsungpao edition has: “Then I wouldn’t have foretold this to you.”

**The monks all bowed and asked the Master to leave them with this gatha, which they received with reverence. The gatha went:**

**“Nothing that exists is true  
don’t think what you see is true  
if you think you see the true  
what you see is surely false  
if you want to find the true  
the mind free of the false is true  
unless your mind forsakes the false  
nothing is true where true can’t be.**

**Living things know how to move  
lifeless things stay still  
those who practice staying still  
resemble motionless lifeless things  
to see what truly doesn’t move  
in movement find what doesn’t move  
what doesn’t move is what doesn’t move  
lifeless things have no buddha seeds.**

**If you can perceive its attributes  
the ultimate truth doesn’t move  
if you can realize this  
you will see how reality works  
all you students of the Way**

**be relentless and concentrate  
don't stand at the entrance of the Mahayana  
clinging to views about birth and death.**

**If those before you are ready  
tell them the Buddha's teaching  
and if they aren't truly ready  
bow and tell them to be good  
there's nothing to argue about in this teaching  
those who argue lose sight of the Way  
clinging to blindness arguing about teachings  
they lead their nature into birth and death."**

It's always hard to say good-bye. Ishi, the last living member of a tribe of hunter-gatherers in northern California, summed it up this way, "I go, you stay." Hui-neng was not so succinct, but he does his best here to help those he leaves behind by leaving them with this advice, which focuses on the two issues at the heart of all Buddhist practice: wisdom and meditation. How do we find the truth? And what does staying still have to do with it?

As for the first question, I am often reminded of Bishop Wilson's two rules for personal guidance: "Firstly, never go against the best light you have; secondly, take care that your light be not darkness" (quoted by the Victorian poet and educator Matthew Arnold, in his *Culture and Anarchy*, p. 81). As for the second question, I keep seeing an image of flies buzzing around a pile of bones.

**Nothing that exists is true.** Hui-neng begins at the end. Get rid of what you think is true, and you'll get rid of what is false.

**Living things know how to move.** A recurring problem in

Buddhist practice is insufficient or excessive stress on meditation. Unless we can sit still long enough to discover our own minds and to see our own natures, we are doomed to spend our lives in the infirmary of existence. But there comes a time when sitting still becomes just another disease, just another cause of suffering. This is why meditation is always paired with wisdom, and why wisdom is always coupled with compassion.

**Lifeless things have no buddha seeds.** This was a major point of discussion among Chinese Buddhists during the T'ang dynasty. Does a dog have the buddha nature? And what about the bamboos and flowers, and even the rocks, in our garden?

**If you can perceive its attributes.** In Section 17, Hui-neng says, "Reality is the substance of 'thought,' and 'thought' is the function of reality." Thoughts of birth and death are delusions.

**If those before you are ready.** The disciples gathered before Hui-neng are being sent off to teach others. Hence, he leaves them with this final advice. To try to teach people who aren't ready to listen is to harm those you would teach, for your failure will only drive them further away from the Dharma. If you have to argue to convince others of the truth of this teaching, they aren't ready to learn, and you aren't ready to teach.

**Tell them to be good.** This is the advice given to those who are not yet ready to examine themselves. In the Tsungpao edition, this becomes "make them happy."

**Textual note:** This section appears in Chapter Ten of the Tsungpao edition, where it appears after Section 46.

49. Upon hearing and understanding the Master's wishes, the monks no longer dared engage in disputes but practiced in accordance with the Dharma. Realizing the Master did not have long to live, they all bowed as one. The venerable Fa-hai then 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 for it. But more than twenty years after my passing, false teachings will create confusion and misrepresent the principle of our school. Someone will then come forward without concern for their own life, and they will distinguish the true Buddhist teachings from the false, and they will raise high the principle of our school and my true Dharma.

As for the robe, it isn't right to pass it on. If you don't believe me, let me recite the 'Transmission of the Robe and Teaching Songs' of the previous five patriarchs. According to the 'Song of the First Patriarch, Bodhidharma,' it isn't right to transmit the robe. Listen, and I'll recite them for you:

*The Song of the First Patriarch, Master  
Bodhidharma*

The reason I came to the land of T'ang  
was to teach and save deluded beings  
to be a flower that unfolds five petals  
from which a fruit ripens naturally.

***The Song of the Second Patriarch, Master Hui-k'o***

In the beginning because there was ground  
a flower was planted and bloomed  
if in the future there is no ground  
where will flowers come from?

***The Song of the Third Patriarch, Master Seng-ts'an***

Flower seeds need to have ground  
from the ground is how flowers grow  
but if a seed lacks the nature to grow  
even in the ground it won't grow.

***The Song of the Fourth Patriarch, Master Tao-hsin***

Flower seeds have the nature to grow  
they grow when they're planted in the ground  
but if karmic causes don't come together  
nothing at all will grow.

***The Song of the Fifth Patriarch, Master Hung-jen***

A sentient being plants a seed  
an insentient flower blooms  
without sentient beings or seeds  
the mind would be a barren ground.

***[The Song of the Sixth Patriarch, Master Hui-neng]***

The ground of the mind contains living seeds  
when the Dharma rains flowers grow  
once you find a flower's living seeds  
the fruit of enlightenment follows."

When the Fifth Patriarch prepared to choose a successor, he commissioned a mural of himself and his predecessors transmitting the Dharma. Here, his successor uses a series of

poems to do the same, which he does by portraying the history of transmission from one mind to another and by encouraging his disciples to become part of this lineage of enlightenment. The issue of transmission was of paramount importance in the second half of the eighth century in China, as the disciples of several Zen masters put forward their teacher as the legitimate successor of the Fifth Patriarch.

It should be noted that these verses also form a major focus of the *Paolinchuan*, which was compiled in 801, if not before, by the monk Chih-chu at Paolin Temple south of Shaokuan, where Huineng lived for many years and where his body is still kept today. This connection would suggest that the edition on which the Tunhuang copies of this text were based must have been compiled sometime before 801—probably around 780, give or take a decade.

**Upon hearing and understanding the Master's wishes.** This first sentence would make more sense appended to the end of the previous section, which would require a slightly different translation, but I am following the divisions established by Kukei and Suzuki.

**But more than twenty years.** This clearly refers to Shen-hui, who leveled a series of critiques against the followers of Shen-hsiu twenty years after Hui-neng's death. The sermon he delivered in 732 became the first shot in a battle between the followers of both masters. Hence, this edition could not have been compiled earlier than 733. However, since Shen-hui was banished in 743, perhaps the reference to the danger of such advocacy is also being referred to here. Note, too, that his essay criticizing the Northern School was titled "Discourse on the Determination of Right and Wrong."

**As for the robe.** Apparently, Hui-neng sees in the final line of Bodhidharma's song support for not transmitting the robe. I think it's a stretch. There are several accounts of what happened to the robe. Among the contenders, one account claims the Empress Wu Ts'et'ien gave it to Ching-chueh, and another says it was given to Master Wu in Szechuan, to name only two. However, the ornate robe given to Hui-neng by Empress Wu is still among the possessions of Nanhua (formerly Paolin) Temple at Tsaohsishan, as is Hui-neng's staff.

**The Song of the First Patriarch.** Bodhidharma reaches back to the beginning of Zen, when Shakyamuni held up a flower, and Kashyapa smiled. Here, though, Bodhidharma becomes the flower, whose five petals refer to his five Chinese successors.

**Land of T'ang.** This refers to the T'ang dynasty (618-960). No doubt, the text has been adjusted to reflect the time when it was composed. Bodhidharma's residence in China occurred during the Liang and Wei dynasties, or the late fifth and early sixth centuries. The Huihsin edition has *tung-t'u*: "eastern land," and the Chisung and Tsungpao editions have *tzu-t'u*: "this land."

**The Song of the Second Patriarch.** Bodhidharma's song introduces the metaphor of the flower, and Hui-k'o's song adds to it. Every flower needs a place to grow. This and the songs of the Third, Fourth, and Fifth Patriarchs are missing in the Huihsin, Chisung, and Tsung-pao editions. They are, however, present in Fa-hai's account.

**The Song of the Third Patriarch.** Not only do flowers need a



place to grow, their seeds must possess the ability to grow. This, of course, refers to our buddha nature.

**The Song of the Fourth Patriarch.** Not only do flowers need a place to grow, and not only must their seeds possess the ability to grow, conditions must support their growth. Practice doesn't occur in space.

**The Song of the Fifth Patriarch.** Not only do flowers need a place to grow, and not only must their seeds possess the ability to grow, and not only must conditions support their growth, someone has to plant them. It's up to us to practice.

**The Song of the Sixth Patriarch.** Not only do flowers need a place to grow, and not only must their seeds possess the ability to grow, and not only must conditions support their growth, and not only must someone plant them, this seed-and-flower metaphor is just a metaphor until someone sees what it really means and eats the fruit.

**Textual note:** This section appears in Chapter Ten of the Tsungpao edition, where the first part follows Section 48, but the second part, which includes only the first poem, follows Section 47.

**50. Master Hui-neng said, “Listen to 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.**

*Verse One:*

**A false flower grows from the ground of the mind  
five petals unfold from its stem  
together committing ignorant deeds  
blown apart by karmic winds.**

***Verse Two:***

**A true flower grows from the ground of the mind  
five petals unfold from its stem  
together cultivating prajna wisdom  
the enlightenment of buddhas to come.”**

**Once the Sixth Patriarch had finished reciting these verses, he dismissed the assembly. As his disciples went outside and thought this over, they knew the Master did not have long to live.**

On the surface, it would appear that Hui-neng is providing his own commentary to the first of the six songs in the previous section. But more likely this is the work of Shen-hui or one of his disciples, who is merely using Bodhidharma's poem as a platform from which to attack the Northern School. In this case, the “false flower” and its five petals would refer to Shen-hsiu and his leading disciples. Of these, P'u-chi, Ching-hsien, Yi-fu, and Hui-fu towered above all others, and the fifth petal could have been any of the other dozen or so disciples whose biographies appear in the *Transmission of the Lamp* (4). And, of course, the “true flower” would refer to Shen-hui and his chief disciples. Of these, none rose to the prominence of Shen-hsiu's disciples, and we could choose any five of the twenty or so whose brief biographies have come down to us in various records.

**Textual note:** This section and its two verses are missing from the Huihsin, Chisung, and Tsungpao editions. Again, they were probably deleted because of their sectarian bias.

**51. 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.”**

Fa-hai asked, “From ancient times until now, how many generations have passed down the Dharma of this direct teaching?”

The Sixth Patriarch said, “It was first passed down by the Seven Buddhas. Shakyamuni Buddha was the seventh, Mahakashyapa the eighth, Ananda the ninth, Madhyantika the tenth, Shamakavasa the eleventh, Upagupta the twelfth, Dhritaka the thirteenth, Buddhanandi the fourteenth, Buddhamitra the fifteenth, Parshva the sixteenth, Punyayashas the seventeenth, Ashvaghosha the eighteenth, Kapimala the nineteenth, Nagarjuna the twentieth, Kamadeva the twenty-first, Rahulata the twenty-second, Sanghanandi the twenty-third, Gayashata the twenty-fourth, Kumarata the twenty-fifth, Jayata the twenty-sixth, Vasubandhu the twenty-seventh, Manorhita the twenty-eighth, Haklenayashas the twenty-ninth, Simha-bhikshu the thirtieth, Shamavasa the thirty-first, Upagupta the thirty-second, Sangharaksha the thirty-third, Shubhamitra the thirty-fourth, and Bodhidharma, the third son of a king of Southern India, was the thirty-fifth.

In the kingdom of T’ang, Hui-k’o was the thirty-sixth, Seng-tsan the thirty-seventh, Tao-hsin the thirty-eighth, Hung-jen the thirty-ninth, and I am now the fortieth to have received the Dharma.”

**The Master said, “From now on, when you transmit this to others, you’ll need a testament. And don’t lose sight of its basic principle.”**

All editions of this text have minor variations in the list of Indian patriarchs. Exactly where the concept of an Indian lineage of Zen masters came from and when it first appeared in China are a matter of conjecture. A list of twenty-four Indian patriarchs (without the Seven Buddhas) appears in the *Fu-fa-tsang yin-yuan-chuan*, a text translated into Chinese, though probably not from Sanskrit, around 472 by Chi-chia-yeh (Kinkara). Its list ends with Simha-bhikshu. This list was later used by Chih-yi (d. 598), the founder of the Tientai School, and also by the Zen School, which added Bodhidharma and his four Indian predecessors, making twenty-eight patriarchs. This list of twenty-eight Indian patriarchs also appears in the *Pao-lin-chuan* (801) and is enlarged upon in the *Tsu-tang-chi* (952) and in the *Tsung-ching-lu* (961). The appearance of this list here has led some scholars to conclude that this section, and thus the Tunhuang edition, must have been compiled sometime before the *Pao-lin-chuan* but after the *Litai fapaochi*, which was compiled in 775 and which does not include such a list.

It may seem a bit odd, this emphasis on the list of people who transmitted the direct teaching whereby we see our nature and become buddhas. But realizing the truth of this teaching is another kind of rebirth, the rebirth of no-birth. And those who find themselves in the land of no-birth have used such means as this to honor their spiritual parents. I’m only surprised the list is so short. I once stayed with an Aini family in the mountains on the China-Burma border. And while we were eating stir-fried bauhinia blossoms and peanuts, the family patriarch rattled off

the names of fifty-four generations of his ancestors.

**Seven Buddhas.** These include Vipashyin, Shikhin, and Vishvabhu in the previous kalpa and Krakuchanda, Kanamuni, Kashyapa, and Shakyamuni in the present kalpa.

**Upagupta.** The Upagupta listed as number twelve in this list is said to have been the teacher of King Ashoka. The identity of the man listed as number thirty-two is unknown. It could be a mistake, but it was common to take the name of a famous predecessor.

**You'll need a testament.** The same language appears in Section 1 and, as it does there, refers to the *Platform Sutra*.

**Textual note:** This section appears in Chapter Ten of the Tsung-pao edition, where it follows the additional material that follows Section 49.

**52. Fa-hai 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 sentient being is, they'll be able to see a buddha. If they don't understand what a sentient being is, they can look for a buddha for ten thousand kalpas and still not find one. So I will tell you how to understand what a sentient being is and how to see a buddha. And I will also leave you with a verse called ‘The Liberation of Seeing the True Buddha.’ As long as a person is deluded, they won't see a

**buddha—only someone who is awake will.”**

**Fa-hai said, “If we could hear this, it will be passed down without interruption from one generation to the next.”**

**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 to understand what a sentient being is, and they will be able to understand what a buddha is. Buddhas are due to sentient beings. Apart from a sentient being, there is no buddha-mind.**

**‘Deluded a buddha is a being  
enlightened a being is a buddha  
a foolish buddha is a being  
a wise being is a buddha  
a biased buddha is a being  
an unbiased being is a buddha  
as long as your mind is biased  
the buddha dwells in a being  
the moment you wake up unbiased  
a being becomes a buddha  
your mind contains a buddha  
your buddha is the real one  
if you didn’t have the buddha-mind  
where would you go to find a buddha?’”**

This text conflates Hui-neng’s departure into what seems like a few minutes, when it probably covered several days, every day another poem. This one reiterates the Sixth Patriarch’s basic teaching: See your nature and become a buddha. And, of course, the converse of this is: Don’t see your nature and remain a sentient being. A buddha is not somewhere else. A buddha is

right here, a thought away, or at least a no-thought away. Where else could a buddha possibly be? Words can only point the way. To find a buddha, we have to find ourselves.

**See a buddha.** Where this appears throughout this section in the Tsungpao edition, it becomes “see your buddha nature.”

**I will also leave you with a verse called ‘The Liberation of Seeing the True Buddha.’** This and the next two paragraphs are missing in the Tsungpao edition.

**Deluded a buddha is a being . . . where would you go to find a buddha?** This entire verse is rendered into prose in the Tsungpao edition.

**The buddha dwells in a being.** The Tunhuang Museum edition has “The buddha dwells in a being’s mind,” which is not supported by any other edition.

**Textual note:** This section appears in Chapter Ten of the Tsungpao edition, where it follows the preceding section.

**53. The Master said, “You disciples, be well. I will leave you with a verse called ‘The Liberation of Seeing the Real Buddha of Your Nature.’ If deluded people in future ages understand the meaning of this verse, they will see the real buddha of their own mind and their own nature. After I give you this verse, I will leave you:**

**‘The pure nature of suchness is the real buddha  
the Three Poisons of falsehood are the real mara  
people who see falsely have a mara in their house  
people who see truly have a buddha as their guest.**

**When the Three Poisons of falsehood appear in your nature  
the King of All Maras makes himself at home  
when true views drive the Poisons from your mind  
the mara becomes a buddha, a real one not a false one.**

**The transformation, realization, and the dharma body  
all three bodies basically are one  
if you search inside you this is what you'll find  
the cause of enlightenment that leads to buddhahood.**

**From the transformation body your pure nature rises  
your pure nature dwells in the transformation body  
and leads you down the path of truth  
where future perfection has no limit.**

**The nature of defilement is the cause of purity  
there is no pure body in the absence of defilement  
just keep your nature free of the Five Desires  
the moment you see your nature it is real.**

**If the direct teaching makes sense to you this life  
you will understand before you is a buddha  
if you try to find a buddha through your practice  
I wonder where you'll find one that's real.**

**If you can find something real inside yourself  
this something real is the cause of buddhahood  
don't look for a buddha outside what is real**



**all those who go in search for one are fools.**

**This direct teaching came here from the West  
but liberating others is up to you to practice  
I urge you students of the Way today  
don't act so depressed when you hear this."**

**After he finished reciting this gatha, 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 and accepting condolence money and wearing mourning garments. That would not be the Buddhist Way. And you would not be my disciples. Act the same as when I was 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 at ease and at peace. That is the Great Way. After I'm gone, just practice in accordance with the Dharma, the same as when I was with you. And 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.**

Hui-neng can't resist the opportunity for one last poem, one last reminder of the one lesson he has taught his disciples for more than forty years: See your nature and become a buddha. Where else are we going to find a buddha? Bodhidharma put it this way: "Beyond this mind you'll never find another buddha. To search for enlightenment or nirvana beyond this mind is impossible. The reality of your own self-nature, not something that is a cause or an effect, this is what is meant by the mind.

Your mind is nirvana. You might think you can find a buddha or enlightenment somewhere beyond the mind, but such a place doesn't exist.” (*The Zen Teaching of Bodhidharma*, p. 9)

**Seeing the Real Buddha.** The Chinese word *chien*: “seeing” does not appear in the Tunhuang Cave edition, but it is in the Tunhuang Museum edition, and it is also part of Hui-neng’s explanation of the title. However, I have adjusted its position in the title, where it should precede rather than follow *tzu-hsing*: “our nature.” Again, I have based my emendation on Hui-neng’s own explanation.

**Three Poisons.** Delusion, Greed, and Anger, the three motive forces of the Wheel of Existence.

**Mara.** This word comes from the Sanskrit root *mri*: “death.” However, it does not refer to an Overlord of the Underworld, but rather to a demon who seeks to dissuade spiritual practitioners from their path. Hence, the King of Maras is not unlike the Christian concept of the Devil.

**Three bodies.** From Hui-neng’s commentary on the *Diamond Sutra*, we can see how important this concept of the *tri-kaya*, or “three bodies,” was to his own understanding of enlightenment. The three bodies of every buddha include the *sanboghya-kaya*, or body of realization (here: future and perfect body), the *nirmana-kaya*, or body of manifestation (here: transformation body), and the *dharma-kaya*, or body of reality. The body of reality is what we realize when we realize the truth. The experience of this realization is the body of realization. The manifestation of this realization is the body of manifestation.

**There is no pure body in the absence of defilement.** In the Tsungpao edition, the meaning here is inverted: “In the absence of defilement there is purity.”

**Five Desires.** The desires associated with the five senses: visual desire, auditory desire, olfactory desire, gustatory desire, and tactile desire.

**Don’t act so depressed.** Hui-neng’s concern is that such a regimen might sound too daunting to some, when in fact it is far easier than continuing to live in the house of cards we have constructed for ourselves.

**You would not be my disciples.** The Tsungpao edition continues from this point with a slightly different version: “‘And that would not be the true Dharma. Just recognize your own mind and see your own nature while remaining free of movement and stillness, birth and death, coming and going, right and wrong, present and past. I am worried that in your deluded state you do not understand my meaning, so I am urging you once more to see your nature. After I am gone, use this for your practice, as if I were here. And if you disobey my teaching, even my presence would be of no help.’ He then recited another verse: ‘Sitting like a dunce not doing good / running around not committing evil / utterly still with senses cut off / unattached at last the mind is free.’ After the Master recited this verse, he sat in meditation. During the third watch, he suddenly told his disciples, ‘I’m going!’ and passed away peacefully.”

**Sit together in meditation.** Some people have misunderstood the direct teaching of Hui-neng and imagined that since all a

person needs to do is to see their nature, they don't need to sit in meditation. But meditation was and remains the primary means advocated by Zen teachers throughout the world for cultivating the necessary focus to put such a teaching into practice. And the meditation hall is the center around which every Zen monastery and nunnery rise and fall.

**Third watch.** The Chinese divided the night into five two-hour periods. In urban areas, people were assigned to keep watch and make patrols to guard against fire and thieves. The third watch extended from eleven P.M. to one A.M.

**Textual note:** This section appears in Chapter Ten of the Tsungpao edition, where it follows the preceding section.

**54. The day the Master passed into Nirvana, the monastery was filled with a wonderful fragrance that lasted for several 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 Tsaohsi Mountain. After he was interred inside a dragon urn, a bright light shone forth and illuminated the sky overhead for three days before it faded. And Magistrate Wei Ch'u of Shaochou erected a memorial stele where offerings are still made today.**

As befits the passing of a person of great spiritual attainment, the world and its myriad beings acknowledge the event with a

display of their sadness. This marks the end of this sutra. The remaining sections are more of an editorial addendum.

**In the eleventh month.** The Tsungpao edition gives this account: “In the eleventh month, because the officials of Kuangchou, Shaochou, and Hsinchou as well as the monks and lay disciples all vied to receive the body and were unable to resolve this issue, they lit some incense and prayed: ‘Whichever direction the incense goes, so shall the Master’s body.’ Since the incense smoke went straight toward Tsaohsi, on the thirteenth day of the eleventh month the funerary urn along with the robe and bowl of the patriarchship were returned there. In the following year, on the twenty-fifth day of the seventh month, he was taken out of the urn, and his disciple Fang-pien covered him with incense-impregnated mud. Aware of his premonition that someone would try to steal his head, to protect the Master’s neck his followers first wrapped him with a lacquered cloth that contained iron. Then they placed him inside a pagoda. Suddenly from within the pagoda, a bright light appeared and lit the sky overhead and lasted for three days.”

**Dragon urn.** The term *lung*: “dragon” often simply refers to something large. The Chinese have used different forms of mummification or body preservation since ancient times. Their use of glazed pottery urns dates back to before the T’ang, and these same urns can still be seen in China today.

**Three days.** The Tunhuang Cave edition has “two days.”

**Memorial stele.** Although the original stele disappeared, it has been replaced by copies. The Tsungpao edition gives this

account along with what it claims was the original inscription: “When the Magistrate of Shaochou reported this to the throne, the emperor ordered a stele erected recording the events of the Master’s life: ‘The Master lived for seventy-six years. When he was twenty-four, he received the patriarch’s robe, and when he was thirty-nine, he became a monk. For thirty-seven years, he taught the Dharma to the benefit of all beings, and he had forty-three Dharma heirs and too many enlightened, exceptional students to count. The robe transmitted by Bodhidharma, the embroidered cassock and crystal bowl presented by Emperor Chung-tsung, and the true likeness prepared by the sculptor Fang-pien along with his ritual implements are all under the protection of the pagoda attendants and enshrined forever at Paolin Monastery (ed. Nanhua Monastery).”

**Textual note:** This section appears in Chapter Ten of the Tsungpao edition, where it follows the preceding section.

**55. This *Platform Sutra* was compiled by the venerable Fa-hai. Before he died, he gave it to his colleague Tao-chi. And before Tao-chi died, he gave it to his disciple Wu-chen. Wu-chen currently lives in Lingnan at Fahsing Monastery on Tsaohsi Mountain, where he still transmits this teaching.**

This section would at first seem to have been added by Wu-chen, or a disciple of Wu-chen, as simply recording the transmission of the text from its initial editor, Fa-hai. However, I have been unable to find any information about either Tao-chi or Wu-chen. And the discrepancy concerning the name or the

location of the monastery where Wu-chen lived suggests that this section was written by someone else, someone unfamiliar with the names and locations of two of the most famous monasteries in South China. In any case, what is interesting is the stress on personal transmission of this text, which, no doubt, was meant to accompany and authenticate oral transmission.

**Lingnan.** This is the name for the region of China south of the Nanling Range and roughly corresponds to what is now Kuangtung province. The use of this term here suggests that this section was added by someone who was not from Lingnan. Again, my guess would be someone from North China, perhaps a disciple of Shen-hui.

**Fahsing Monastery.** This was the name of the monastery in Kuangchou where Hui-neng became a monk. Either the name of the monastery or its location must be a mistake. The monastery at Tsaohsi Mountain where Hui-neng lived has gone through many name changes, but it has never been called Fahsing. According to the temple's own records, when it was first built in 502, its name was Paolin. In 705, the name was changed to Chunghsing, and in 708 it was changed to Fachuan. Around 980, it was changed to Nanhua, and this has been the name by which it has been known ever since. For a disciple of Hui-neng to have confused Fahsing Monastery in the city of Kuangchou with Paolin Monastery on Tsaohsi Mountain would have been extremely unlikely. Certainly this was added by someone in the next generation of disciples who was unfamiliar with South China.

**Textual note:** The Huihsin edition has the transmission of this

text going from Fa-hai to Chih-tao, from Chih-tao to Pi-an, from Pi-an to Wu-chen, and from Wu-chen to Yuan-hui. This section is missing in the Chisung and Tsungpao editions.

**56. If this teaching is passed on, it must be to someone of superior wisdom who deeply believes the teaching of the Buddha. Those who have based themselves on its great compassion and who have taken this sutra as their authority continue to do so today.**

This sutra now takes the place of the robe that Bodhidharma brought from India and the transmission of which ended with Hui-neng. The language here suggests that this section was written at least several decades after the main body of the text, when it might have seemed worth noting that people still upheld its teaching.

**Textual note:** In place of this section, the Tsungpao edition has this: “All those who pass on the *Platform Sutra* to others and who reveal the teaching of this school contribute to the flourishing of the Three Treasures and benefit beings everywhere.”

**57. This monk is a native of Shaochou’s Chuchiang County. 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 real example of its practice / only taught to those with wisdom / who then explain it to liberate fools.**

**But only those transmit this teaching who vow to**



practice and who don't retreat from difficulty and who are able to bear hardship and who are rich in blessings and virtue. If their 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 hidden meaning.

*The Platform Sutra of the Direct Teaching of the Southern School of the Supreme Mahayana in one volume.*

This final section is the work of the earliest known editor, Fa-hai, who refers to himself in the first line. Although his dates are unknown, he was among the disciples present when Hui-neng died in 713, and he probably lived another decade or so. I would guess that the text he edited was finished by 720, if not earlier. However, as I have noted in Section 49 and elsewhere, Shen-hui, or his disciples, clearly added some of the foregoing materials to Fa-hai's original text. But they would have had to have finished their work sometime before 780 or so in order for the copy on which my translation is based to have been written down.

The world's earliest known printed book, the *Diamond Sutra*, did not appear until 868. So when this sutra was compiled, it still had to be copied out by hand. This made transmission of the text more easily controlled and dependent on the teacher-student relationship. From the time Zen first arrived in China, transmission was based on this relationship. Bodhidharma did not transmit this teaching to Hui-k'o until he

was certain Hui-k'o was ready to receive it. This has been one of the hallmarks of Zen. This is not because Zen cannot be understood by anyone. It can. But not everyone is ready to understand it. Thus, here at the end of this text, Fa-hai warns against its haphazard transmission.

**Shaochou's Chuchiang County.** Shaochou Prefecture is now known as Shaokuan, while Chuchiang is still Chuchiang. This was the location of Tsaohsi Mountain and the site of Paolin Temple, where Huineng did most of his teaching. Shaokuan is 220 kilometers north of Kuangchou and is a major stop on the train line that connects China's southern port with Beijing, another two thousand kilometers to the north.

**Who then explain it to liberate fools.** This and several other phrases in this section have stumped commentators and translators. Not only do editions vary as to wording, different interpretations as to punctuation yield different results. It is worth noting that the language and style in this final section reflect a hackneyed attempt at literary refinement by someone not quite up to the task. But what could be a more perfect conclusion to the Zen teaching of Hui-neng? The first series of lines here are in rhymed couplets, and I have followed Yang Zengwen in treating them as a poem.

***The Platform Sutra of the Direct Teaching of the Southern School of the Supreme Mahayana.*** This title appears on both copies of the sutra found at Tunhuang and in several later catalogues.

**Textual note:** This section is missing in the Tsungpao edition.

# Appendix



## I. Additional Text

*Preceding and following Sections 42 and 43, there is a series of conversations present in Chapter Seven of the Tsungpao edition but absent in both Tunhuang copies. These conversations are between Hui-neng and his disciples Chih-t'ung, Chih-ch'ang, Chih-tao, Hsing-ssu, Huai-jang, Hsuan-chiao, Chih-huang, Fang-pien, and two unnamed monks. I have translated them below in the order in which they appear.*

**1. Fa-hai.** "The monk Fa-hai (ed. the editor of this text) was a native of Shaochou's Chuchiang County. During his first audience with the Master, he asked, 'Could you please explain the meaning of "This mind is the Buddha"?"

The Master said, 'When the next thought doesn't appear, that's the mind. When the last thought doesn't disappear, that's the Buddha. What creates all appearances is the mind, and what remains free of all appearances is the Buddha. If I tried to explain this fully, an entire kalpa wouldn't be long enough. Listen to my gatha:

"This mind" is wisdom  
"the Buddha" is meditation  
when these two are the same  
every thought is pure  
who understands this teaching

depends on their habits and nature  
on their actions not arising  
to work on both is the Way.’

Upon hearing these words, Fa-hai experienced a great realization and responded with this gatha:

‘This mind has always been the Buddha  
before I understood I deceived myself  
knowing now how meditation and wisdom work  
I cultivate both and transcend all things.’”

**2. Chih-t’ung.** “There was a monk named Chih-t’ung from the town of Anfeng in Shouchou prefecture (ed. near the modern city of Huainan in Anhui province). He had already read the *Lankavatara Sutra* a thousand or more times, but he didn’t understand the Three Bodies or the Four Kinds of Knowledge. So he bowed and asked the Master to explain their meaning.

The Master said, ‘As for the Three Bodies, the Pure Dharma Body is your nature, the Perfect Realization Body is what you know, and the Myriadfold Transformation Body is what you do. To talk about the Three Bodies apart from your own nature would be to have bodies without knowledge. Once you realize that the Three Bodies have no nature of their own, this is what is meant by the Four Kinds of Knowledge of Enlightenment. Listen to my gatha:

Your nature possesses the Three Bodies  
which develop the Four Kinds of Knowledge  
because they aren’t separate from your senses  
they lead you straight to buddhahood  
if you believe what I’m telling you now

you'll be forever free of delusion  
don't follow those people running around  
talking all day about enlightenment.'

Chih-t'ung asked again, 'Could you say something about the meaning of the Four Kinds of Knowledge?'

The Master said, 'Once you understand the Three Bodies, the Four Kinds of Knowledge will immediately be clear. What more can I say? To talk about the Four Kinds of Knowledge apart from the Three Bodies would be to have knowledge without a body, which would be to turn this knowledge into no knowledge. Here's another gatha:

Perfect Mirror Knowledge is your nature purified  
Universal Knowledge is the mind with no defects  
All-penetrating Knowledge sees without effort  
All-succeeding Knowledge is like a great round mirror  
the fifth and eighth, sixth and seventh are fruits and seeds  
transformed

(ed. The Eight Kinds of Consciousness are meant:  
The first five arise from the conjunction of the five  
sense organs and realms of sensation and give rise to  
All-succeeding Knowledge; the sixth is conceptual  
consciousness, which gives rise to All-penetrating  
Knowledge; the seventh is rational consciousness,  
which gives rise to Universal Knowledge; and the  
eighth is Storehouse Consciousness, which gives rise  
to Perfect Mirror Knowledge.)

if all we use are names, none of them is real  
but if when they change, you have no attachment

in the midst of chaos, you're always in samadhi.'

Chih-t'ung suddenly realized the knowledge of his nature and then offered this gatha:

'The Three Bodies are originally my own body  
the Four Kinds of Knowledge are my own clear mind  
when body and knowledge don't block each other  
we respond to all things whatever their form  
to try to practice would be a mistake  
to try to stay still would not be true skill  
the Master has helped me fathom this mystery  
I've finally put an end to stupefying names.'"

**3. Chih-ch'ang.** "There was a monk named Chih-ch'ang from the town of Kueihsi in Hsinchou prefecture (at the western end of the Yangtze Gorges). He left home when he was seven determined to see his nature. As he came to pay his respects one day, the Master asked, 'Where are you from? And what are you here for?'

Chih-ch'ang said, 'This student recently went to Paifengshan in Hungchou (ed. Nanchang, the capital of Kiangsi province) to pay my respects to Master Ta-t'ung and to receive instruction in how to see my nature and become a buddha. But I still had questions. So I have come all this way to throw myself at the Master's feet in hopes of his compassion and instruction.'

The Master said, 'What exactly did he tell you? See if you can remember.'

Chih-ch'ang said, 'After I had been there for three months, I still hadn't received any instruction. Because I was hungry for the Dharma, I went by myself one night to the abbot's room, and I asked him what my original mind and my original nature

were like. He said, “Do you see the space around us or not?” I answered, “Yes, I see it.” And he said, “When you see this space, does it have any distinguishing features?” I answered, “Space doesn’t have any form, much less any distinguishing features.” And he said, “Your original nature is just like space. When there is nothing at all you can see, this is true seeing. And when there is nothing at all you can know, this is true knowing. It isn’t blue or yellow, long or short. Just see that your original source is completely pure and the body of your awareness is perfectly clear. This is to see your nature and become a buddha. This is also what a tathagata sees.” Although I heard this explanation, I still didn’t fully understand and have come to beg the Master to instruct me.’

The Master said, ‘What he told you still includes views, which is why you don’t understand. Let me give you this gatha:

Not seeing a thing but thinking of not seeing  
is like when a cloud blocks the sun’s face  
not knowing a thing but thinking of not knowing  
is just like when lightning appears in the sky  
as long as such concepts keep suddenly arising  
you won’t find the means to escape your confusion  
but if in one thought you know you’re mistaken  
your own wondrous light is there shining forth.’

When Chih-ch’ang heard this gatha, his mind became suddenly clear, and he offered one of his own:

‘I thoughtlessly gave rise to concepts  
seeking buddhahood still attached to form  
harboring the thought of enlightenment  
hoping to overcome old delusions



the body of my nature and source of awareness  
just went along drifting in vain  
if I hadn't entered the patriarch's chamber  
I'd still be lost at the fork in the road.”

**4. Chih-tao.** “There was a monk named Chih-tao from the town of Nanhai in Kuangchou prefecture (ed. This is now a suburb of the city of Kuangchou and also where Hui-neng lived as a youth) who asked this question, ‘Ever since this student left home, I have read the *Nirvana Sutra* now for more than ten years. But I still don't understand what it's really about, and I was hoping the Master might honor me with his instruction.’

The Master said, ‘What part don't you understand?’

He said, “‘All phenomena are impermanent and subject to origination and cessation. But because it involves the cessation of origination and cessation, nirvana is bliss.’” (ed. Chih-tao is quoting from the *Nirvana Sutra*: 3.) This is what I'm confused about.’

The Master said, ‘What are you confused about?’

He said, ‘All beings have two bodies, namely a physical body and a dharma body. The physical body is impermanent and subject to origination and cessation. The dharma body is permanent and doesn't possess any consciousness or feeling. The sutra says, “Because it involves the cessation of origination and cessation, nirvana is bliss.” I don't understand which body enters nirvana and which body experiences bliss. If it's the physical body, then when the physical body ceases to exist, the Four Elements disperse. This is truly suffering, and suffering cannot be called “bliss.” And if it's the dharma body that enters nirvana, then it would be the same as a stick or a rock. So how could it experience bliss?’

Also, some say our dharma nature is the body of origination

and cessation, and the Five Skandhas are the functions of origination and cessation. With one body, and five functions, origination and cessation continue forever—origination being when functions arise from the body, and cessation being when functions return to the body. But if we admit the existence of rebirth, then life forms would never cease to exist. And if we don't admit the existence of rebirth, then we would forever be in nirvana and would be the same as lifeless forms. Thus, all dharmas would be obstructed by nirvana, and they would never come into existence. How could that be bliss?

The Master said, 'You're a follower of the Buddha. Why then do you use the mistaken views of permanence and impermanence of other sects and criticize the Dharma of the Supreme Vehicle?

According to you, there's a separate dharma body outside the physical body. You seek a nirvana beyond origination and cessation. Also, from "Nirvana is everlasting bliss," you infer that there is a body that experiences it. This is because you cling to birth and death and indulge in mundane pleasures. You should know that it was because all the deluded people in the world mistake the physical body consisting of the Five Skandhas as their own body, and they discriminate dharmas as forms of external sensation, and they love life and hate death, and they remain unaware that their never-ending thoughts are dreams, illusions, and empty fictions, and they suffer the round of existence in vain and turn the everlasting bliss of nirvana into forms of suffering, and they spend their days running around, the Buddha pitied such beings and taught them the true bliss of nirvana, which at any given moment does not have the appearance of origination and does not have the appearance of cessation, much less the cessation of origination and cessation.

Thus, nirvana is right here. But although it is right here, there is no concept of it being here, which is why it is called everlasting bliss. This bliss is not experienced by anyone, nor is it not experienced by anyone. So how could anyone say there is one body and Five Skandhas much less claim that nirvana obstructs dharma and keeps them from being born. This is to slander the Buddha and malign the Dharma. Listen to my gatha:

Maha Nirvana is unsurpassed  
full, clear, unchanging, still, and bright  
(ed. five qualities of nirvana)  
ordinary fools call it death  
other sects claim it's the end  
those who follow the Hinayana  
think of it as non-action  
but these are intellectual musings  
based on the sixty-two views  
(ed. the number of types of delusions)  
falsely concocted fictitious names  
how could they point to reality  
only those who transcend concepts  
who reach past grasping and renunciation  
who know the dharma of the Skandhas  
and the self that dwells among them  
who see all material forms outside  
every sound and every noise  
are equally dreams and illusions  
who don't distinguish fool and sage  
or try to explain the meaning of nirvana  
who put an end to space and time  
who use their senses in response  
without thinking about their use

who distinguish every dharma  
without thinking about distinctions  
the kalpa-ending fire can burn up the ocean  
the wind can beat down the mountains  
the true lasting bliss of nirvana  
this is what nirvana is like  
I force myself to describe it this way  
to make you give up your erroneous views  
if you don't try to follow my words  
maybe you'll understand just a little.'

When Chih-tao heard this gatha, he experienced a great realization. He leapt to his feet and bowed, then he sat back down."

**5. Hsing-ssu.** "Zen Master Hsing-ssu was born to the Liu family in Chichou prefecture in the town of Ancheng (ed. the city of Chi-an in Kiangsi province). As soon as he heard that the Dharma center of Tsaohsi was flourishing, he came straightaway to pay his respects. He asked, 'What should one do to avoid becoming stuck in stages?'

The Master said, 'What do you know how to do?'

Hsing-ssu said, 'Nothing that has to do with Buddhism.'

The Master said, 'So what stage are you stuck in?'

He said, 'Since I've never had anything to do with Buddhism, what sort of stage would I be in?'

The Master thought highly of Hsing-ssu and made him the leader of the Sangha. Then one day the Master said, 'You should lead a congregation somewhere else and not let it die out.'

Since he had already obtained the Dharma, Hsing-ssu returned to Chingyuan Mountain in Chichou prefecture (ed. just

outside his hometown), where he spread the Dharma and carried on the teaching. His posthumous name was Zen Master Hung-ch'i. (ed. He was also known as Ch'ing-yuan and was the teacher of Shih-t'ou, the patriarch of what became known as the Soto Zen sect in Japan.)"

**6. Huai-jang.** "Zen Master Huai-jang was a son of the Tu family of Chinchou prefecture (ed. Ankang in southern Shensi province). He first called on National Master Hui-an on Mount Sung. But Hui-an sent him to Tsaohsi. When he came to pay his respects, the Master asked him, 'Where are you coming from?'

Huai-jang said, 'Mount Sung.'

The Master said, 'What sort of thing comes here like this?'

Huai-jang said, 'To call it a "thing" is to miss the mark.'

The Master said, 'Can it be cultivated or experienced?'

Huai-jang said, 'It's not that it isn't cultivated or experienced, but rather that it isn't corrupted or defiled.'

The Master said, 'It's just because it isn't corrupted or defiled that it's treasured by all buddhas. You're like this. And I'm like this. Prajnatara of India (ed. the teacher of Bodhidharma) prophesied, "From below your feet, a colt will leap forth and trample everyone in the world to death." This refers to what's in your mind. But there's no need to talk about it anytime soon.'

Huai-jang suddenly understood. Subsequently, he served as an attendant for fifteen years and steadily deepened his understanding of the mysteries. Afterwards, he moved to Nanyueh (ed. Hengshan, in southern Hunan province), where he expounded the principles of Zen. His posthumous name was Zen Master Ta-hui. (ed. He was the teacher of Ma-tsu, whose name meant 'Horse Patriarch,' the colt to whom Hui-neng

referred above.)”

**7. Hsuan-chiao.** “Zen Master Hsuan-chiao of Yungchia was a son of the Tai family of Wenchou (ed. coastal port of southern Chekiang province). In his youth, he was already versed in the sutras and shastras, and he excelled in the Tientai teaching of *chih-kuan*: ‘cessation and contemplation.’ But it was as a result of reading the *Vimalakirti Sutra* that he discovered the land of the mind.

The Master’s disciple Hsuan-ts’e once happened to visit him and got into a discussion with him. Finding his words to be in uncanny agreement with those of the patriarchs, Hsuan-ts’e said, ‘From what master have you obtained the Dharma?’

Hsuan-chiao said, ‘When I studied the *Vaipulya* (ed. a class of Mahayana texts) sutras and shastras, they all became my teachers. Later, in the *Vimalakirti Sutra*, I realized the principle of buddha-mind. But I have not yet had my understanding confirmed.’

Hsuan-ts’e said, ‘Before the time of the first buddha, this was possible. But since the time of the first buddha, those who have experienced self-realization without a teacher have all been gifted followers of other paths.’

He said, ‘Then would you, sir, confirm my understanding?’ Hsuan-ts’e said, ‘My assessment would be superficial. But the Sixth Patriarch lives in Tsaohsi. People flock to him from all around, and there are those among them who have obtained the Dharma. If you go, I will accompany you.’

Hsuan-chiao then went with Hsuan-ts’e to pay his respects. But after walking around the Master three times, he stood there holding his staff.

The Master said, ‘A monk is capable of three thousand

modes of deportment and eighty thousand ways of behaving. But where, sir, do you get such arrogance?’

Hsuan-chiao said, ‘Birth and death are important. And our impermanence itself is so transient.’

The Master said, ‘Why don’t you understand no-birth and comprehend no-transience?’

Hsuan-chiao said, ‘Understanding means no-birth, and comprehending is essentially no-transience.’

The Master said, ‘So it is. So it is.’

Hsuan-chiao then performed a full prostration and immediately said good-bye.

The Master said, ‘You are leaving too soon.’

Hsuan-chiao said, ‘But I’m not even moving. How could I do so too soon?’

The Master said, ‘Who knows he’s not moving?’

Hsuan-chiao said, ‘You, sir, are creating distinctions.’

The Master said, ‘You have truly penetrated the meaning of no-birth.’

Hsuan-chiao said, ‘How could no-birth have any meaning?’

The Master said, ‘Who is it who distinguishes no meaning?’

He said, ‘Distinguishing has no meaning.’

The Master said, ‘That’s wonderful. But at least stay the night.’

And so he was called One-night Chiao (ed. Chiao, the second half of his name, means ‘Enlightenment’). Later, he composed the ‘Song of Witnessing the Way’ (ed. this has often been translated ‘Song of Enlightenment’), which became popular throughout the realm. His posthumous name was Master Wu-hsiang (Formlessness), but his contemporaries called him Chen-chiao (True Enlightenment).’’

**8. Chih-huang.** “After having initially studied with the Fifth Patriarch, Zen Master Chih-huang thought he had already achieved true samadhi. He lived in a hut and meditated constantly for twenty years. Once, when the Master’s disciple, Hsuan-ts’e, was traveling north of the Yellow River, he heard about Chih-huang. When he finally arrived at his hut, he asked, ‘What do you do here?’

Chih-huang said, ‘Enter samadhi.’

Hsuan-ts’e said, ‘When you say you “enter samadhi,” is there a mind that enters? Or is there no mind that enters? If no mind enters, then any lifeless thing, like a tile or a rock or a stick or a piece of straw, should be capable of samadhi. And if the mind enters, then any living thing that possesses consciousness should also be capable of samadhi.’

Chih-huang said, ‘The moment I enter samadhi, I don’t see if there is a mind that exists or not.’

Hsuan-ts’e said, ‘If you don’t see if there’s a mind that exists or not, then you would always be in samadhi. So how could you leave or enter? And if you can leave or enter, then it isn’t true samadhi.’

Chih-huang didn’t answer. After a long while, he said, ‘Who is your teacher?’

Hsuan-ts’e said, ‘My teacher is the Sixth Patriarch of Tsaohsi.’

Chih-huang said, ‘What does the Sixth Patriarch say about Zen samadhi?’

Hsuan-ts’e said, ‘What my Master says is that it is wonderfully clear and perfectly still; that our body and functions are reality itself; that the Five Skandhas are essentially empty, and the Six Realms of Sensation do not exist, and there is nothing to leave or enter, and nothing to calm or confuse; that



the nature of Zen is no attachment and freedom from attachment to the stillness of Zen; that the nature of Zen is no birth and freedom from the thought of giving birth to Zen; that the mind is like space but without the conception of space.'

When Chih-huang heard this explanation, he came straightaway to see the Master. When the Master asked him why he had come, Chih-huang reported the foregoing as the reason. The Master said, 'It is, indeed, as he said. If your mind can just be like space without being attached to the idea of space, nothing will obstruct you whatever you do. If you don't think about movement or stillness and aren't affected by the sacred or profane, and both subject and object disappear, and your nature and its attributes are just so, there will be no occasion when you won't be in samadhi.'

At that moment, Chih-huang experienced a great realization. The thought of what he had accomplished over the past twenty years disappeared without a trace. And that night people in Hopei (ed. in North China, where he had been living in a hut) heard a voice in the sky say, 'On this day, Zen Master Chih-huang has attained the Way.' Afterwards, Chih-huang bowed and said goodbye and returned to Hopei, where he taught both clerics and laypeople."

**9. A monk.** "A monk asked the Master, 'Who understands the meaning of Huang-mei (ed. the Fifth Patriarch, whose temple was north of Huangmei)?'

The Master said, 'Someone who understands the teaching of the Buddha.'

The monk said, 'Does the Master understand it or not?'

The Master said, 'I don't understand the teaching of the Buddha.'"

**10. Fang-pien.** “One day the Master wanted to wash the Patriarch’s robe, but there wasn’t any water pure enough. So he hiked behind the monastery five *li* or so, until he saw a place where the vegetation and the air were sufficiently auspicious. He then struck his staff on the ground, and a spring gushed forth in response, and it kept flowing until it formed a pond. Then he kneeled down and washed the robe on a rock. (ed. Clothes are usually washed by using a rock or other flat surface like a washing board.)

Suddenly a monk appeared and bowed. He said, ‘I am Fang-pien, and I am from Western Shu (ed. the western half of Szechuan province around Chengtu). Recently in Southern India, I met Master Bodhidharma. And he told me, “Go back quickly to the Land of T’ang (ed. China). The treasure of the true dharma-eye and the robe of Kashyapa that I transmitted have been passed down for six generations now. Go to Tsaohsi in Shaochou Prefecture to see for yourself and pay your respects.” So I have come all this way in hopes of seeing the robe and bowl transmitted by my Master (ed. Bodhidharma).’

The Master showed them to him. Then he asked, ‘What sort of work do you do?’

Fang-pien said, ‘I’m a sculptor.’

The Master turned serious and said, ‘Make a statue of me.’

Fang-pien was dumbfounded. But after a few days, he produced a sculpture that was a perfect likeness. It was only seven inches high, but the workmanship was marvelous.

The Master smiled and said, ‘You only understand the nature of statues. You don’t understand the nature of buddhas.’ The Master stretched out his arm and felt the top of Fang-pien’s head and said, ‘You will be a permanent field of blessings for

humans and gods.’

The Master also rewarded him with a robe, which Fang-pien divided into three parts. One part he used to cover the statue. One part he kept for himself. And one part he wrapped in palm leaves and buried in the ground. And he made an oath, ‘I will find this robe in another life when I am the abbot of this place, and when I rebuild its shrine halls.’ (ed. According to one commentary, in the eighth year of the Chiayu Period of the Sung dynasty (1063), a monk named Wei-hsien was digging while repairing the shrine hall and found the robe, which still looked new. He took it to Kaochuan Temple, and whoever put it on had their prayers answered.)”

**11. A monk.** “A monk once quoted a gatha by Zen Master Wo-lung (ed. Sleeping Dragon):

‘The sleeping dragon has a trick  
it can stop all kinds of thoughts  
confronting things its mind doesn’t stir  
day by day its enlightenment grows.’

When the Master heard this he said, ‘This gatha doesn’t illuminate the land of the mind. Anyone who practices in accordance with this will only increase their bondage.’ He then offered his own gatha:

‘The wise-and-able (ed. which is Hui-neng’s name) has no  
trick  
he doesn’t stop any thought at all  
confronting things his mind keeps stirring  
how could his enlightenment grow?’”

*Before and after Section 44, the Tsungpao edition adds the following two sections, the first of which appears in Chapter Eight and the second of which appears by itself in Chapter Nine.*

**12. Chih-ch'e (Hsing-ch'ang).** "The monk Chih-ch'e was a native of Kiangsi. His original name was Chang Hsing-ch'ang, and he engaged in daring exploits as a youth. Despite the division into the Northern and Southern Schools, the leaders of the two factions did not compete with each other. But their followers harbored sectarian feelings, and the disciples of the Northern School established their master, Shen-hsiu, as the Sixth Patriarch. Because they were jealous that people knew about the transmission of the Patriarch's robe, they sent Hsing-ch'ang to assassinate the Sixth Patriarch. But the Master had such powers of perception, he foresaw this and placed ten ounces of gold beside his meditation cushion. When Hsingch'ang entered the Patriarch's room late one night hoping to kill him, the Master stretched out his neck. Hsing-ch'ang hacked at it several times but failed to make a mark.

The Master said, 'The sword of truth doesn't err / the sword of falsehood isn't true / I will give you money / but not my life.'

Hsing-ch'ang was dumbfounded. When he finally came to his senses, he begged forgiveness and said he wanted to become a monk. The Master handed him the gold and said, 'You had better leave. Otherwise I'm afraid my followers will harm you. You can change your appearance and come back later, and I will take you in.'

Hsing-ch'ang did as he was told and disappeared that night. Later, he left home and became a monk and was diligent in his observation of the precepts. One day he remembered the

Master's words, and he made the long journey to pay his respects.

The Master said, 'I've been thinking of you for a long time. What took you so long?'

Hsing-ch'ang said, 'In the past, I received the Master's forgiveness for my crime. Although I have now left home and have been practicing austerities, I'll never be able to repay your kindness, unless I can transmit the Dharma and liberate others. Your disciple has often read the *Nirvana Sutra*, but I don't understand the meaning of permanence and impermanence. May the Master be compassionate enough to explain this a little.'

The Master said, 'What is impermanent is your buddha nature. What is permanent is the mind that discriminates all good and bad dharmas.'

Hsing-ch'ang said, 'But the Master's explanation completely contradicts what the sutra says.'

The Master said, 'I transmit the mind-seal of buddhas. How could I dare contradict the sutras of the Buddha?'

Hsing-ch'ang said, 'But the sutra says that the buddha nature is permanent, and yet the Master says it is impermanent, and that good and bad dharmas, even the bodhi mind, are all impermanent, and yet the Master says they are permanent. These are contradictions and have only made this student even more perplexed.'

The Master said, 'In the past, when I heard the nun Wu-chin-tsang reciting the *Nirvana Sutra*, I explained it to her. And not one of my explanations or interpretations failed to agree with the sutra. Nor is that the case now with you.'

Hsing-ch'ang said, 'This student's intelligence is limited. Could the Master please explain the ins and outs of this?'

The Master said, 'Don't you realize that if the buddha nature,

much less any good or bad dharma you can name, is permanent, then between now and the end of the kalpa no one would be able to set their mind on enlightenment. Thus, what I call impermanent is simply what the Buddha calls the Way of True Permanence. Moreover, if dharmas were all impermanent, then the self-nature of everything would be subject to birth and death. But there is no place where the nature that is truly permanent doesn't reach. Thus, what I call permanent is simply what the Buddha means by true impermanence.

Because ordinary people and members of other sects cling to a mistaken permanence, and the followers of the Two Vehicles claim that such permanence is impermanent but then create the Eight Perversions (ed. mistaken views concerning permanence and impermanence, joy and suffering, self and no self, purity and impurity), through his penetrating teaching in the *Nirvana Sutra*, the Buddha refuted their biased views and clarified true permanence, true joy, true self, and true purity. You have been clinging to the words and turning your back on the meaning. By using the impermanence of annihilation and the permanence of certain death, you have mistaken the Buddha's perfect and profound final instructions. Even if you read them a thousand times, what good would they do you?

Hsing-ch'ang suddenly felt awake and spoke this gatha:

'Because we hold on to an impermanent mind  
the Buddha spoke of our permanent nature  
those unaware of skillful means  
gather pebbles in the springtime water  
without my lifting a finger  
my buddha nature appears before me  
it wasn't bestowed on me by my teacher  
nor did I obtain anything at all.'

The Master said, 'Now you have reached the bottom and are well named Chih-ch'e (ed. Determined to Reach the Bottom).'

Chih-ch'e bowed and returned to his seat."

**Imperial emissary.** "On the First Full Moon of the First Year of the Shenlung Era (ed. 705), Empress Wu Ts'e-t'ien and Emperor Chung-tsung issued this decree: 'We have invited masters Hui-an and Shen-hsiu to receive our offerings in the palace and have delved into the One Vehicle whenever we have had time from our countless responsibilities. Out of deference, these two monks have said, "In the South there is a Master Hui-neng who secretly received the robe and the Dharma of Master Hung-jen and who transmits the mind-seal of the Buddha. He is the one you should invite here to question." Hence, we are sending our attendant Hsueh Chien to deliver this imperial summons asking the Master to be compassionate enough to come to the capital as soon as possible.'

However, the Master declined on the grounds of illness, preferring to spend his remaining days in the forest.

Hsueh Chien said, 'The Zen worthies in the capital say that anyone who hopes to understand the Way must sit in meditation and cultivate samadhi and that no one has ever attained liberation without relying on meditation and samadhi. What is the Master's teaching regarding this?'

The Master said, 'The Way is realized by the mind. How could it depend on sitting? The sutra (ed. This is paraphrased from the *Diamond Sutra*: 29) says, "To claim that the Tathagata sits or lies down is to travel the path of falsehood." And how so? Because he does not come from anywhere, and he does not go anywhere. To be free of origination and free of cessation, this is the pure meditation of the Tathagata. When all dharmas are

empty and still, this is the pure sitting of the Tathagata. Ultimately, there is no attaining, much less any sitting.’

Hsueh Chien said, ‘When I return to the capital, their majesties are bound to question me. Would the Master be compassionate enough to tell me the essential teaching of the mind so that I can transmit this to the two palaces (ed. in Loyang and Ch’ang-an) and to students of the Way in the capitals, who, like lamps, will then light hundreds and thousands of other lamps so that the dark will become light, and light will lead to light without end?’

The Master said, ‘The Way is neither dark nor light. Light and dark refer to things that are opposites. And even if light leads to light without end, it still has an end, because it is defined in terms of its opposite. Thus, the *Vimalakirti Sutra* says, “The Dharma is beyond compare, because it has no opposite.”’

Hsueh Chien said, ‘Brightness stands for wisdom, and darkness represents affliction. If those who cultivate the Way don’t use wisdom to illuminate affliction, how will they ever escape beginningless birth and death?’

The Master said, ‘Affliction is enlightenment. They aren’t two, and they aren’t separate. If you use wisdom to illuminate affliction, this is the view of those who follow the Two Vehicles (ed. of Hinayana Buddhism), who use the devices of the sheep and the deer carts (ed. of shravakas and pratyeka-buddhas). People of higher wisdom and greater ability are not like this.’

Hsueh Chien said, ‘Then what is the Mahayana view like?’

The Master said, ‘Ordinary people see light and the absence of light as two states. The wise understand that their nature doesn’t have two states. The nature without two states is our true nature. Our true nature doesn’t shrink in an ordinary person or expand in a wise person. It isn’t confused by affliction, and it



isn't stilled by meditation or samadhi. It isn't annihilated, and it doesn't last forever. It doesn't come or go. It isn't inside, outside, or in between. It doesn't begin and doesn't end. Our nature and its attributes are simply so. It lasts forever and never changes and is what we call the Way.'

Hsueh Chien said, 'How is the Master's claim that it doesn't begin and doesn't end different from that of other sects?'

The Master said, 'When other sects speak of no beginning and no end, they use the end to put a stop to the beginning, and they use the beginning to highlight the end. They liken the end to no end, and they call the beginning no beginning. But when I speak of no beginning and no end, there's no beginning in the first place, so there can't be any end. This is not the same as other sects.'

If you want to know the essential teaching of the mind, simply don't think about anything good or bad, and you will naturally enter the essence of the pure mind, which is clear and always still and whose wondrous activities are as countless as the sands of the Ganges.'

When Hsueh Chien heard this teaching, he suddenly experienced a great awakening. He then bowed and said good-bye and returned to the palace and reported what the Master said. On the Third Day of the Ninth Month of the same year, an edict was issued commending the Master as follows:

'The Master has declined our invitation on the grounds of illness. Cultivating the Way on our behalf, he is a field of blessing for the whole nation. Like Vimalakirti, who recuperated from illness in Vaisali (ed. a city in ancient India and the scene of the *Vimalakirti Sutra*), the Master propagates the Mahayana, transmits the mind of buddhas, and teaches the Dharma of Non-Duality. Hsueh Chien has transmitted the Master's instructions

and buddha knowledge. Because we have accumulated merit for many kalpas and have planted good roots in previous lives, we have encountered the Master in this life and have directly understood the Supreme Vehicle. In appreciation of the Master's kindness, we bow to him without cease and present him with a precious robe and crystal begging bowl. And we order the magistrate of Shaochou to renovate his monastery, and we confer the name Kuo-en Temple on his former home.'"



## II. Finding List

The following list provides a cross-reference for the distribution of material in the Tsungpao edition (Chapters One through Ten) and the Tunhuang edition (Sections 1 through 57):

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: a1, 42, a2, a3, 43, a4, a5, a6, a7, a8, a9, a10, a11

Chapter Eight: 39, x, 40, 41, a12, 44

Chapter Nine: a13

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

x: text absent in the Tunhuang edition, which I have translated in the commentary or textual notes.

a: text absent in the Tunhuang edition, which I have translated in the Appendix.

Note: Sections 38, 50, 55, 56, and 57 of the Tunhuang edition are absent from the Tsungpao edition.

### III. Names, Terms, Texts, and Places

Where Chinese occurs in the following list, it is romanized according to the Wade-Giles system and not according to the *pin-yin* system (aka Mao's revenge) currently in use in China. Exceptions to this include common usages, such as Beijing, or people, such as Yang Zengwen, whose names have become known in their *pin-yin* spelling. Also, the characters are those of traditional Chinese and not the simplified forms developed in China during the Cultural Revolution.

Abhidharma	阿毘達磨
afflictions	煩惱
<i>akshobya</i>	不動
<i>alaya-vijnana</i>	阿賴耶識
Amita Buddha	阿彌陀佛
<i>Amita Sutra</i>	阿彌陀經
An Lu-shan	安祿山
An Tao-ch'eng	安道誠
<i>Analects</i>	論語
Ancheng	安城

Anfeng		安豐
Anhui		安徽
Ankang		安康
Ashvaghosha		馬鳴
<i>asuras</i>		阿修羅
Avalokiteshvara		觀自在/觀世音
<i>Avatamsaka Sutra</i>		華嚴經
<i>avidya</i>		無明
<i>Awakening of Faith in the Mayahana</i>		大乘起信論
<i>ayatanas</i>		入/處
basic principle		宗旨
Bear Ear Mountain	熊耳山	
Beijing		北京
beings		眾生
bhagavan		世尊
<i>bhutatathata</i>		真如
Blessed One		世尊
blessings		福
Bodh Gaya		菩提伽耶
<i>bodhi</i>		菩提
bodhi tree		菩提樹
Bodhidharma		菩提達磨
Bodhiruci		菩提留支

*bodhisattva*

菩薩

*Bodhisattva Precept  
Sutra*

菩薩戒經

bondage

繫縛

*Brahma's Net Sutra*

梵網經

*buddha*

佛

buddha nature

佛性

buddhaland

佛土

Buddhist Canon

大藏經

*Ch'an*

禪

*ch'an-ting*

禪定

Chang Chiu-ling

張九齡

Chang Jih-yung

張日用

Ch'ang-an

長安

Chekiang

浙江

Chen-chiao

真覺

*chen-hsing*

真性

*chen-ju*

真如

Ch'en

陳

Ch'en dynasty

陳紀

*ch'en-ai*

塵埃

Chi-an

吉安

Chi-chia-yeh

吉迦夜

*chi-tu*

	嫉妒
Ch'i-sung	契嵩
Chiangchou	江州
Chiayu Period	嘉祐年代
Chichou	蘄州
Chichun	蘄春
<i>chieh-t'an</i>	戒壇
<i>chien</i> (indirect)	漸
<i>chien</i> (seeing)	見
<i>chien-hsiu</i>	漸修
Chienfotung Caves	千佛洞
<i>chih</i> (wisdom)	智
<i>chih</i> (know)	知
Chih-ch'ang	智常
Chih-ch'e	志徹
Chih-ch'eng	志誠
Chih-chu	智炬
Chih-huang	智隍
<i>chih-kuan</i>	止觀
Chih-tao	志道
Chih-t'ung	志通
Chih-yi	智顗
Chinchou	金州

<i>ching</i>	靜
Ch'ing dynasty	清紀
Ching-chueh	淨覺
Ching-hsien	景賢
Chingtechen	景德鎮
<i>ching-tso</i>	靜坐
<i>ch'ing-chi</i>	請記
Chisung	契嵩
Chitienling Pass	騎田嶺
Chiuchiang	九江
<i>cho</i>	著
Choukoutien	周口店
<i>chu-chi</i>	痘疫
Chu-chih	俱胝
<i>ch'u-shih</i>	出世
Chuang-tzu	莊子
<i>Chuangtzu</i>	莊子
<i>Ch'uan-hsin fa-yao</i>	傳法要
<i>Ch'uan-teng-lu</i>	傳燈錄
Chuchiang	曲江
Chung-tsung	中宗
Chunghsing	中興
<i>Chung-kuo ch'an-tsung-shih</i>	中國禪宗史



Cold Mountain

寒山

compassion

慈悲

*Complete*

*Enlightenment Sutra*

圓覺經

Confucius

孔子

contemplate purity

觀淨

contemplate the mind

觀

Cultural Revolution

文化革命

*dang-lai*

當來

delusion

妄(想/念)

*devas*

天

*Dhammapada*

法句

*dharma(s)*

法

Dharma

法

Dharma Realm

法界

dharma body

法身

*dharma-kaya*

法身

dharma nature

法性

*dhatus*

界

*Diamond Sutra*

金剛經

direct

頓

direct teaching

頓教

*Discourse on the*

*Determination of Right*

*and Wrong*

定是非論

dispassion

不動

*Doctrine of the Mean*

中庸

dragon king

龍王

dragon urn

龍龕

East Mountain Zen

東山禪

Eight Kinds of  
Consciousness

識

Eight Perversions

顛倒

Eight Winds

風

Eight Wrong Ways

邪道

Eighteen Dhatus

界

Eighteen Elements of  
Perception

界

Eightfold Noble Path

正道

Emperor Wu of Liang

梁武帝

emptiness

空

Empty-mind Zen

空禪

enlightenment

菩提

external, inanimate states

外境無

*fa*

法

Fa-chen

法珍

Fa-hai

法海

<i>fa-hsiang</i>	法相
<i>fa-hsing</i>	法性
Fa-ju	法如
Fa-ta	法達
Fahsing Temple	法興寺
<i>fan-suo-yu-hsing chieh-shih-hsu-wang</i>	有相皆是虛妄
Fang-pien	方辯
Fanyang	范陽
Feng Kan	豐干
Fengmao Mountain	馮茂山
field of blessings	福田
Fifth Patriarch	五祖
First Patriarch	初祖
Five Desires	五欲
Five Skandhas	五蘊/陰
Formless Gatha/Verse	無相偈/頌
Formless Precepts	無相戒
formlessness	無相
Four Boundless Vows	四弘大願
Four Elements	四大
Four Kinds of Knowledge	四種智
Four Noble Truths	四諦

Four States	四相
Four Vehicles	四乘
Fourth Patriarch	四祖
<i>Fu-fa-tsang yin-yuan- chuan</i>	付法因緣傳
Fukien	福建
functions arising from our nature	自性居用
Ganges	恆河
<i>gatha</i>	偈
good friend	善知識
Great Vehicle/Path	大乘
Great Wisdom That Leads to the Other Shore	大智慧到彼岸
Gunabhadra	求那跋陀羅
Guo Peng	郭朋
Haiming Monastery	海明寺
Han Chinese	漢人
Han River	漢水
Hani	哈尼
<i>Heart Sutra</i>	經
Hengshan	衡山
Hinayana	小乘
Hopei	河北

Hsiang River	湘江
Hsiangyang	襄陽
Hsientsung Record	顯宗記
Hsientien Era	先天年
Hsihsia	西夏
<i>hsin</i>	淮
<i>hsin-ping</i>	信稟
<i>hsin-ti</i>	地
Hsinchou	州
Hsinchou (Appendix)	性相
<i>hsing</i>	性
Hsing-ch'ang	行昌
<i>hsing-hsiang</i>	性相
Hsing-ssu	性相
Hsinhsing	興
Hsuan-chiao	玄覺
<i>hsuan-ching</i>	玄鏡
Hsuan-ti	宣帝
Hsuan-tsang	玄奘
Hsuan-ts'e	玄策
Hsuan-tsung	玄宗
Hsueh Chien	薛簡
Hu Shih	胡適

Huai	懷
Huai River	淮河
Huai-jang	懷讓
Huaichi	懷集
Huainan	淮南
Huang-po	黃檗
Huangmei	黃梅
Huayen	華嚴
Huchou	湖州
Hui	會
Hui-an	慧安
Hui-chung	慧忠
Hui-fu	慧福
Hui-hsin	惠昕
Hui-k'o	慧可
Hui-ming	惠明
Hui-neng	惠能
Hui-shun	惠順
Huihsin	惠昕
Hung-jen	弘忍
Hungchou	洪州
<i>icchantika</i>	闍提
ignorance	—

	無明
impermanence	無常
indirect	漸
initial enlightenment	初覺
Jambudvīpa	閻浮提
Jinghui	淨慧
jungle rat	獼猴
Kaifeng	開封
Kaiyuan Era	開元年間
<i>kalpa</i>	劫
Kan River	瀨江
<i>k'an</i>	看
Kanchou	贛州
Kao-tsung	高宗
Kaochuan Temple	高泉寺
Kapilavastu	迦毘羅衛
<i>karma</i>	/行為
Kashyapa	迦葉
Kiangsi	江西
King Ashoka	阿育王
King of All Maras	魔王
King of Dharmas	法王
King of Virtue	

Bodhisattva

高貴德王菩薩

know your mind

識（自）心

*k'uang-huang*

誑妄

Kuangchou

廣州

Kuanghsi

廣西

Kuanghsiao Temple

光孝寺

Kuangtung

廣東

*Kuangtung Provincial  
Gazetteer*

廣東省地方知

Kuangyen Bodhisattva

光嚴童子

Kueihsi

貴溪

Kumarajiva

鳩摩羅什

*k'ung*

空

Kuo-en Temple

國恩寺

*lai*

來

Lake Taihu

太湖

language and attributes of  
dharma

言法相

*Lankavatara Sutra*

楞伽經

Lao-tzu

老子

Layman P'ang

龐居士

Lesser Vehicle/Path

小乘

*li*

里



Li	李
<i>li nien</i>	念
Liang dynasty	梁朝
liberation	脫/出
Lingnan	嶺南
<i>Li-tai fa-pao-chi</i>	歷代法寶記
Liu Chih-lueh	劉志略
<i>liu-tai</i>	六代
<i>Liu-tsu-shih yuan-chi-wai-chi</i>	六祖大師緣外記
Lotus Sutra	法華經
Loyang	洛陽
Lu Chen	盧珍
Lu Hsing-t'ao	盧行瑫
Lungshan	龍山
Madhyayana	中乘
<i>maha</i>	大/摩訶
<i>Mahabharata</i>	摩訶婆羅多
Mahakashyapa	摩訶迦葉
Mahamati	大慧
<i>Mahaprajnaparamita Sutra</i>	大般若波羅蜜多經
<i>Maha-prajna-paramita</i>	

*Ta-kuang-ming-chou*

大般若波羅蜜大明咒經

Mahasthama

大勢至

Mahayana

大乘

Maitreya

彌勒

Manchu

滿族

Manjushri

文殊

*manus*

人

*mara*

魔

Marquis of Wei

魏武侯

Master Ch'e

哲法師

Master Yuan

袁禪師

material body

色身

meditation

定

Meiling Pass

梅嶺關

*men-jen*

門人

Mengshan

蒙山

merit

功德

Middle Vehicle

中乘

mind

僧

Mind Only

唯

mind-poem

偈

Ming dynasty

明朝

*ming-ching*

	明鏡
monk	僧
Mount Lanka	楞伽山
Mount Sumeru	須彌山
Mount Sung	嵩山
Nagarjuna	龍樹
<i>nama-rupa</i>	名色
Nanchang	南昌
Nanching	南京
Nanching Prefecture	南
Nanhai	南海
Nanhua Temple	南華寺
Nanling	南嶺
Nanyang	南陽
Nanyueh	南岳
<i>narakas</i>	地獄
nature	性
<i>nien</i>	念
Nine Rivers Ferry	九江
Ninghsia	寧夏
<i>nirmana-kaya</i>	身
<i>nirvana</i>	瑠盤

*Nirvana Sutra*

涅槃經

no attachment

無著

no form

無相

no memory

無

No Mind Zen

無禪

no thought

無念

non-attachment

無著

Northern School

北宗

novice

童子

objective states

境界

One Buddha Vehicle

一佛乘

One Finger Zen

一指禪

One Practice Samadhi

一行三昧

one-sided view

一邊見

original enlightenment

本覺

Pai Chu-yi

白居易

Paifengshan

白峰山

*pao-chung (chen-chung)*

保重/珍重

Paolin Monastery

寶林寺

*Pao-lin-chuan*

寶林傳

*paramita*

波羅蜜(多)

passions	塵勞
patriarch	祖
Patriarch's Hall	大師堂
Peking Man	北京人
<i>pen-lai wu-yi-wu</i>	本來無一物
Perfection of Wisdom	般若波羅蜜(多)
<i>Perfection of Wisdom in 700 Lines</i>	文殊般若經
<i>Pi-an</i>	彼岸
<i>ping-ch'eng</i>	稟承
<i>ping-shou</i>	稟受
<i>Platform Sutra</i>	壇經
Poyang Lake	鄱陽湖
<i>prajna</i>	般若
<i>Prajnaparamita</i>	般若波羅蜜(多)
<i>Prajna-paramita hsin- ching</i>	般若波羅蜜多經
Prajnatara	婆若多羅
<i>pratyeka-buddha</i>	緣覺
precept instructor	教授師
Precept School	律宗
<i>pretas</i>	餓鬼

P'u-chi	普寂
<i>pu-tung</i>	不動
Pure Land	淨土
Purna	富樓那
Queen Vaidehi	章提希夫人
<i>rakshasas</i>	羅刹
realization body	報身/受用身
<i>Records of Shen-hui</i>	神會錄
Red Pine	赤松
Ren Jiyu	任繼愈
Ren Ziyi	任子宜
right views	正見
<i>samadhi</i>	三昧
<i>sanbogha-kaya</i>	報身/受用身
<i>sansara</i>	生死/輪迴
Sanskrit	梵
<i>Sarva-dharma</i>	諸法無行經
<i>appravritti-nirdesha sutra</i>	
Sea of Sansara	生死海
Sea of Suffering	苦海
Second Patriarch	二祖

see your nature	見(自)性
self-awareness	自悟
self-existent dharmas	法我
self-realization	自悟
Seng-ts'an	僧璨
Shakyamuni	釋迦牟尼
Shangjiao	上饒
Shangssu Temple	上寺
Shaochou	韶州
Shaokuan	韶關
Shariputra	舍利子
<i>shastra</i>	論
<i>shen</i> (Sec20)	身
<i>shen</i> (Sec28)	深
Shen-hsiu	神秀
Shen-hui	神會
<i>sheng</i>	生
Shenlung Era	神龍年
Shensi	陝西
<i>shih</i>	詩
<i>shih-chun</i>	使君
<i>shih-ta-yi</i>	識大意
Shihchingshan	石經山

Shikshananda	寶叉難陀
Shouchou	壽州
<i>shravakas</i>	聲聞
Shravasti	舍衛國
Shuangfengshan	雙峰山
Shuddodana	淨飯
<i>shunyata</i>	空
Six Desires	六欲
Six Gates	六門
Six Kinds of Consciousness	六識
Six Perfections	六度
Six Realms of Sensation	六塵
Six Senses	六門/根
Six States of Existence	六趣
Six Thieves	六賊
Sixth Patriarch	六祖
<i>skandhas</i>	陰/蘊
skillful means	方便
Small Vehicle	小乘
Sogdia	粟特國
Southern School	南宗



Ssukungshan

司空山

*ssu-lei*

色類

Storehouse

識

Consciousness

straightforward mind

直

*stupa*

塔

Subhuti

須菩提

suchness

真如

Sui dynasty

隋紀

Sumeru

須彌

Sung dynasty

宋朝

*Sung kao-seng-chuan*

宋高僧傳

Supreme Mahayana

最上大乘

*sutra*

經

Szechuan

四川

Szuhui

四會

Ta-hui

大慧

*Ta-sheng wu-sheng*

*fang-pien-men*

大乘無生方便門

Ta-t'ung

大通

Tachien Temple

大鑒寺

Tafan Temple

大梵寺

*t'ai*

臺

Taisho Tripitaka

大正大經

take refuge

歸依

*T'an-ching-yi-ti*

壇經—滴

T'ang dynasty

唐朝

Tangyang

當陽

*Tao*

道

*tao-ch'ang*

道場

Tao-chi

道際

*tao-hao*

道好

Tao-hsin

道信

Tao-hsuan

道宣

Tao-ming

道明

Tao-sheng

道生

*Taoteching*

道德經

*tathagata*

如來

Tayu Pass/Ridge

大庾嶺

Ten Evil Deeds

惡

Ten Good Deeds

善

ten thousand dharmas

萬法

testament

依

Theravada

上座部

Third Patriarch	三祖
third watch	三更
Thirty-seven Aids to Enlightenment	三七道品
Thirty-six Pairs	三十六對
Three Bodies	三身
three-bodied buddha	三身佛
Three Classifications	三科
Three Gorges	三峽
Three Hateful Realms	三惡(道/趣)
Three Obstructions	三障
Three Periods	三世
Three Pillars	三柱
Three Poisons	三毒
Three Realms	三界
Three Treasures	三寶
Three Vehicles	三乘
<i>tien-tao</i>	顛倒
Tientai	天台
Ting Fu-pao	丁福保
<i>tiryagyoni</i>	畜生

transformation body	化身/身
<i>Transmission of the Lamp</i>	傳燈錄
<i>tri-kaya</i>	三身
<i>tri-skandha</i>	三蘊
Triple Refuge	三歸依
<i>tsa-huang</i>	雜妄
Ts'ai Nien-sheng	蔡念生
Tsaohou Village	曹候村
Tsaohsi Mountain	曹溪山
<i>Ts'ao-hsi-ta-shih pieh-chuan</i>	曹溪大師別卷
Ts'ao Shu-liang	曹叔良
Ts'ao Ts'ao	曹操
<i>ts'ei</i>	賊
<i>tso-ch'an</i>	坐禪
<i>tsu</i>	祖
<i>Tsung-ching-lu</i>	宗鏡錄
Tsung-pao	宗寶
Tsungpao	宗寶
<i>Tsu-t'ang-chi</i>	祖堂集
<i>tu-chi</i>	讀訖

Tumen Temple	度門寺
<i>tun</i>	頓
<i>tun-ch'i</i>	頓契
<i>tun-chiao</i>	頓教
<i>tung</i>	東
Tungshan	東山
Tunhuang	敦煌
Tunhuang Caves	敦煌石窟
Tunhuang Museum	敦煌博物館
Twelve Ayatanas	二入/處
twelve divisions	二部(經)
Twelve Links of Dependent Origination	二因緣
Twelve Locations of Sensation	二入/處
Two Buddha Vehicle	二佛乘
<i>tzu-hsing</i>	自性
<i>tz'u-fu</i>	父
<i>tz'u-shih</i>	刺史
Upagupta	優婆多/優婆堀第
Vaipulya	方等
Vaisali	毗耶
<i>Vimalakirti Sutra</i>	維摩詰經

*Visualization of  
Paradise Sutra*  
*wan-fa*

Wang Wei  
*Wan-ling-lu*

Wei  
Wei Ch'u

Wei-hsien

Wenchou

Western Paradise

Western Region

Western Shu

What Leads to the Other  
Shore

Wheel of Rebirth

Wing-tsit Chan

wisdom

Wo-lung

Wonchuk

Wong Mou-lam

*wu*

Wu-chen

觀無量壽佛經

萬法

王維

宛陵錄

魏

韋璩

惟先

溫州

西方極樂世界

西域

西蜀

到彼岸

輪迴

陳榮捷

智(慧)

臥龍

圓測

黃茂林

悟

悟真

Wu-chin-tsang	無盡
Wu-chu	無
<i>wu-hsiang</i>	無相
<i>wu-nien</i>	無念
<i>wu-pien</i>	無邊
Wu Ts'e-t'ien	武則天
Xiang Da	向達
Yama	閻魔
<i>yana</i>	乘
Yang Zengwen	楊曾文
Yangtze Gorges	江三峽
Yangtze River	江
<i>yen-fu</i>	嚴父
<i>yi</i>	亦
Yi-fu	義福
<i>yi-yueh</i>	依約
Yichang	宜章
Yichun	宜春
Yin-shun	印順
Yin-tsung	印宗
<i>ying-wu-suo-chu er-sheng-ch'i-hsin</i>	無所而生其

Yogacara

瑜伽

*yu-shih*

又是

Yuan-hui

圓會

Yuanchou

袁州

Yuchuan Temple

玉泉寺

*yung-tzu-chen-ju-hsing*

用自真如性

Zen

禪

*zen-na*

禪那

Zhou Shaoliang

周紹良

*Zhung-guo fo-jiao zung-shu*

中國佛教叢





## IV. The Platform Sutra—Tunhuang Museum Text

The following text of the *Platform Sutra* is the one found at Shangssu Temple in the Tunhuang Caves in 1935 by Ren Ziyi and edited by Yang Zengwen in 1993. I have noted any changes I have made in my commentary. All paragraph breaks are also mine and made to conform with my translation.

### 敦博本六祖壇經

南宗頓教最上大乘摩訶般若波羅蜜經

六祖慧能大師於韶州大梵寺說法壇經一卷

兼受無相戒弘法弟子法海集記

1.

慧能大師於大梵寺講堂中，昇高座，說摩訶般若波羅蜜法，授無相戒。其時座下僧尼道俗一萬餘人，韶州刺史韋璩及諸官僚三十餘人、儒士三十餘人，同請大師說摩訶般若波羅蜜法。

刺史遂令門人僧法海集記，流行後代與學道者，承此宗旨，遞相傳受，有所依約，以為累承。

2.

說此《壇經》能大師言：善知識，淨心念摩訶般若波羅蜜法。大師不語，自淨心神。

良久乃言：善知識，靜聽；慧能茲父，本貫范陽，左降遷流嶺南，作新州百姓。慧能幼少，父又早亡。老母孤遺，移來南海，艱辛貧乏，於市賣柴。

忽有一客買柴，遂領慧能送至於官店。客將柴

去，慧能得錢。却向門前，忽見一客讀《金剛經》。慧能一聞，心明便悟。乃問客曰：「從何處來，持此經典？」

客答曰：「我於新州黃梅縣東馮墓山，禮拜五祖弘忍和尚，見今在彼門人有千餘眾。我於彼聽見大師勸道俗，但持《金剛經》一卷，即得見性，直了成佛。」

慧能聞說，宿常有緣，便即辭親，往黃梅馮墓山禮拜五祖弘忍和尚。

3.

弘忍和尚問慧能曰：「汝何方人，來此山禮拜吾？汝今向吾邊，復求何物？」

慧能答曰：「弟子是嶺南人，新州百姓，今故還來禮拜和尚，不求餘物，唯求作佛。」

大師遂問慧能曰：「汝是嶺南人，又是獼獠，若為堪作佛！」

慧能答曰：「人即有南北，佛性即無南北；獼獠身與和尚不同，佛性有何差別？」

大師欲更共議，見左右在傍邊，大師便更不言，遂發遣慧能令隨眾作務。時有一行者，遂差慧能於碓坊踏碓八箇餘月。

4.

五祖忽於一日喚門人盡來，門人集已。五祖曰：「吾向汝說，世人生死事大。汝等門人終日供養，只求福田，不求出離生死苦海。汝等自性迷，福門何可求？汝等總且歸房自看，有智慧者自取本性般若之智，各作一偈呈吾。吾看汝偈，若悟大意者，付汝衣法，真為六代祖。火急急！」

5.

門人得處分，却來各至自房，遞相謂言：「我等不須澄心用意作偈，將呈和尚。神秀上座是教授師，秀上座得法後自可依止，偈不用作。」諸人息心，盡不敢呈偈。

大師堂前有三間房廊，於此廊下供養，欲畫楞伽變相，並畫五祖大師傳授衣法，流行後代為記。畫人盧珍看壁了，明日下手。

6.

上座神秀思惟諸人不呈心偈，緣我為教授師。我若不呈心偈，五祖如何得見我心中見解深淺？我將心偈上五祖，呈意求法即善，竟祖不善，却同凡心奪其聖位。若不呈心偈，終不得法。良久思惟，甚難甚難。

夜至三更，不令人見，遂向南廊下中間壁上，題作呈心偈，欲求衣法。若五祖見偈，言此偈語，若訪覓我，我見和尚，即云是秀作。五祖見偈，若言不堪，自是我迷，宿業障重，不合得法。聖意難測，我心自息。秀上座三更於南廊中間壁上，秉燭題作偈。人盡不知。偈曰：

身是菩提樹，心如明鏡臺。  
時時勤拂拭，莫使有塵埃。

7.

神秀上座題此偈畢，却歸房臥，並無入見。五祖平旦，遂喚盧供奉來南廊下畫楞伽變相。五祖忽見此偈，讀訖。乃謂供奉曰：「弘忍與供奉錢三十千，深勞遠來，不畫變相也。《金剛經》云：凡所有相，皆是虛妄。不如留此偈，令迷人誦。依此修行，不墮三惡道。依法修行人有大利。」

大師遂喚門人盡來，焚香偈前。眾人見己，皆生敬心。〔大師曰〕：「汝等盡誦此悟此偈者，方得見性。依此修行，即不墮落。」門人盡誦，皆生敬心，喚言：「善哉！」

五祖遂喚秀上座於堂內問：「是汝作偈否？若是汝作，應得吾法。」

秀上座言：「罪過，實是神秀作。不敢求祖位，但願和尚慈悲，看弟子有少智慧，識大意否？」

五祖曰：「汝作此偈見解，只到門前，尚未得入。凡夫依此偈修行，即不墮落。作此見解，若竟無上菩提，即不可得。要入得門，見自本性。汝且去，一兩日思惟，更作一偈來呈吾。若入得門，見自本性，當付汝衣法。」秀上座去數日，作偈不得。

8.

有一童子於碓坊邊過，唱誦此偈。慧能一聞，知未見性，即識大意。能問童子：「適來誦者是何偈？」

童人答能曰：「你不知大師言生死事大，欲傳衣法，令門人等各作一偈，來呈吾看，悟大意即付衣法，稟為六代祖。有一上座名神秀，忽於南廊下書無相偈一首，五祖令諸門人盡誦。悟此偈者即見自性，依此修行，即得出離。」

慧能答曰：「我此踏碓八箇餘月，未至堂前。望上人引慧能至南廊下見此偈禮拜，亦願誦取，結未生緣，願生佛地。」

童子引能至南廊下。能即禮拜此偈，為不識字，請一人讀。慧能聞已，即識大意。慧能亦作一偈，又讀得一解書人於西間壁上題著，呈自本心。不識本心，學法無益，識心見性，即悟大意。慧能偈曰：

菩提本無樹，明鏡亦無臺。  
佛性常清淨，何處有塵埃。

又偈曰：

心是菩提樹，身為明鏡臺。  
明鏡本清淨，何處染塵埃。

院內徒眾見能作此偈，盡怪。慧能却入碓坊。五祖忽來廊下，見慧能偈，即知識大意，恐眾人知。五祖乃謂眾人曰：「此亦未得了。」

9.

五祖夜至三更，喚慧能堂內說《金剛經》。慧能一聞，言下便悟。其夜受法，人盡不知，便傳頓教及衣，以為六代祖。將衣為信稟，代代相傳；法即以心傳心，當令自悟。

五祖言：「慧能，自古傳法，氣如懸絲，若住此間，有人害汝，即須速去！」

10.

能得衣法，三更發去。五祖自送能至九江驛，登時便別。五祖處分：「汝去，努力將法向南，三年勿弘此法。難起已後弘化。善誘迷人若得心關，與悟無別。」辭違已了，便發向南。

11.

兩月中間，至大庾嶺。不知向後有數百人來，欲擬捉慧能，奪衣法。未至半路，盡總却迴。唯有一僧，姓陳名惠順，先是三品將軍，性行粗惡，直至嶺上，來趁把著。慧能即還法衣，又不肯取。言：「我故還來求法，不要其衣。」能於嶺上便傳法惠順。惠順得聞，言下心開。能使惠順即却向北化人。

12.

慧能來於此地，與諸官僚道俗，亦有累劫之因。教是先聖所傳，不是慧能自知。願聞先聖教者，各須淨心聞了，願自除迷，如先代悟。

慧能大師喚言：「善知識，菩提般若之智，世人本自有之，即緣心迷，不能自悟，須求大善知識示道見性。善知識，愚人智人，佛性本亦無差別，只緣迷悟；迷即為愚，悟即成智。」

13.

善知識，我此法門，以定慧為本。第一勿迷言定慧別。定慧體一不二，即定是慧體，即慧是定用；即慧之時定在慧，即定之時慧在定。善知識，此義即是定慧等。

學道之人作意，莫言先定發慧，先慧發定，定慧各別。作此見者，法有二相：口說善，心不善，定慧不等。心口俱善，內外一種，定慧即等。

自悟修行，不在口諍。若諍先後，即是迷人，不斷勝負，却生法我，不離四相。

14.

一行三昧者，於一切時中行住坐臥，常行直心是。《淨名經》云：『直心是道場，直心是淨土。』莫心行詭曲，口說法直，口說一行三昧，不行直心，非佛弟子。但行直心，於一切法上無有執著，名一行三昧。

迷人著法相，執一行三昧，直言坐不動，除妄不起心，即是一行三昧。若如是，此法同無情，却是障道因緣。道須通流，何以却滯？心不住法，道即通流，住即被縛。若坐不動是，維摩詰不合呵舍利弗宴坐林中。

善知識，又見有人教人坐看心淨，不動不起，從此致功。迷人不悟，便執成顛倒。即有數百般如此教道者，故知大錯。

15.

善知識，定慧猶如何等？如燈光。有燈即有光，無燈即無光。燈是光之體，光是燈之用。名即有二，體無兩般。此定慧法，亦復如是。

16.

善知識，法無頓漸，人有利鈍。迷即漸勸，悟人頓修。自識本心，自見本性。悟即元無差別，不悟即長劫輪迴。

17.

善知識，我此法門從上已來，頓漸皆立無念為宗，無相為體，無住為本。

何名為相無相？於相而離相。無念者，於念而不念。無住者，為人本性，念念不住，前念、今念、後念，念念相續，無有斷絕，若一念斷絕，法身即離色身。念念時中，於一切法上無住；一念若住，念念即住，名繫縛。於一切法上念念不住，即無縛也。此是以無住為本。

善知識，外離一切相，是無相。但能離相，性體清淨，是以無相為體。

於一切境上不染，名為無念。於自念上離境，不於法上生念。莫百物不思，念盡除却。一念斷即死，別處受生。學道者用心，莫不識法意。自語尚可，更勸他人迷。不自見迷，又謗經法。是以立無念為宗，即緣迷人於境上有念，念上便起邪見，一切塵勞妄念從此而生。

然此教門立無念為宗，世人離境，不起於念。若無有念，無念亦不立。無者無何事，念者念何物？無者離二相諸塵勞；念者念真如本性。真如是念之體，念是真如之用。自性起念，雖即見聞覺知，不染萬境，而常自在。《維摩經》云：外能善分別諸法相，內於第一義而不動。

18.

善知識，此法門中坐禪原不看心，亦不看淨，亦不言不動。

若言看心，心元是妄，妄如幻故，無所看也。



若言看淨，人性本淨；為妄念故，蓋覆真如。離妄念，本性淨。不見自性本淨，起心看淨，却生淨妄。妄無處所，故知看者却是妄也。淨無形相，却立淨相。言是功夫，作此見者，障自本性，却被淨縛。

若修不動者，不見一切人過患，是性不動；迷人自身不動，開口即說人是非，與道違背。看心看淨，却是障道因緣。

19.

今既如是，此法門中何名坐禪？此法門中一切無礙，外於一切境界上，念不起為坐，見本性不亂為禪。

何名為禪定？外離相曰禪，內不亂曰定。外若著相，內心即亂；外若離相，內性不亂。

本性自淨自定，祇緣境觸，觸即亂，離相不亂即定。外離相即禪，內不亂即定。外禪內定，故名禪定。

《維摩經》云：「即時豁然，還得本心。」《菩薩戒經》云：「我本源自性清淨。」善知識，見自性自淨，自修自作自性法身，自行佛行，自作自成佛道。

20.

善知識，總須自體，與授無相戒。一時遂慧能口道，令善知識見自三身佛：

於自色身歸依清淨法身佛，

於自色身歸依千百億化身佛，

於自色身歸依當來變滿報身佛。已上三唱

色身是舍宅，不可言歸。向者三身，自在法性，世人盡有，為迷不見。外覓三身如來，不見自色身中三身佛。

善知識，聽與善知識說，令善知識於自色身見自法性有三身佛。此三身佛，從自性上生。

何名清淨〔法〕身佛？善知識，世人性本自淨，萬法在自性。思惟一切惡事，即行於惡行；思量一切善事，便修於善行。知如是一切法盡在自

性。自性常清淨，日月常明，只為雲覆蓋，上明下暗，不能了見日月星辰，忽遇惠風吹散卷盡雲霧，萬像森羅，一時皆現。

世人性淨，猶如清天，慧如日，智如月，智慧常明。於外著境，妄念浮雲蓋覆，自性不能明。故遇善知識，開真正法，吹却迷妄，內外明徹，於自性中萬法皆現。一切法在自性，名為清淨法身。自歸依者，除不善心及不善行，是名歸依。

何名為千百億化身佛？不思量性即空寂，思量即是自化。思量惡法化為地獄，思量善法化為天堂，毒害化為畜生，慈悲化為菩薩，智慧化為上界，愚癡化為下方。自性變化甚多，迷人自不知見。

一念善，智慧即生。一燈能除千年闇，一智能滅萬年愚。莫思向前，常思於後。常後念善，名為報身。一念惡，報却千年善亡；一念善，報却千年惡滅。無常已來後念善，名為報身。

從法身思量，即是化身；念念善，即是報身。自悟自修，即名歸依也。皮肉是色身，色身是舍宅，不言歸依也。但悟三身，即識大意。

今既自歸依三身佛已，與善知識發四弘大願。善知識一時逐慧能道：

眾生無邊誓願度，煩惱無邊誓願斷，  
法門無邊誓願學，無上佛道誓願成。三唱

善知識，「眾生無邊誓願度」，不是慧能度。善知識，心中眾生，各於自身自性自度。

何名自性自度？自色身中邪見煩惱、愚癡迷妄，自有本覺性。只本覺性，將正見度。即悟正見般若之智，除却愚癡迷妄，眾生各各自度。邪來正度，迷來悟度，愚來智度，惡來善度，煩惱來菩提度。如是度者，是名真度。

「煩惱無邊誓願斷」，自心除虛妄。「法門無邊誓願學」，學無上正法。「無上佛道誓願成」，常下心行，恭敬一切，遠離迷執，覺智生般若，除却迷妄，即自悟佛道成，行誓願力。

22.

今既發四弘誓願訖，與善知識無相懺悔，滅三世罪障。

大師言：善知識

前念後念及今念，念念不被愚迷染，  
從前惡行一時〔除〕，自性若除即是懺。  
前念後念及今念，念念不被愚癡染。  
除却從前矯誑心，永斷名為自性懺。  
前念後念及今念，念念不被疽疫染，  
除却從前嫉妬心，自性若除即是懺。以上  
三唱

善知識，何名懺悔？懺者，終身不作；悔者，知於前非。惡業恒不離心，諸佛前口說無益。我此法門中永斷不作，名為懺悔。

23.

今既懺悔已，與善知識授無相三歸依戒。

大師言：善知識

歸依覺兩足尊，

歸依正離欲尊，

歸依淨眾中尊。

從今已後，稱佛為師，更不歸依餘邪迷外道。願自三寶慈悲證明。善知識，慧能勸善知識歸依自性三寶。佛者，覺也；法者，正也；僧者，淨也。

自心歸依覺，邪迷不生，少欲知足，離財離色，名兩足尊。

自心歸依正，念念無邪故，即無愛著，以無愛著，名離欲尊。

自心歸依淨，一切塵勞妄念雖在自性，自性不染著，名眾中尊。

凡夫不解，從日至日，受三歸依戒。若言歸佛，佛在何處？若不見佛，即無所歸。既無所歸，言却是妄。

善知識，各自觀察，莫錯用意。經中只言自歸依佛，不言歸依他佛。自性不歸依，無所依處。

今既自歸依三寶，總各各至心與善知識說摩訶般若波羅蜜法。善知識雖念不解，慧能與說，各各聽。

摩訶般若波羅蜜者，西國梵語，唐言大智慧到彼岸。此法須行，不在口念；口念不行，如幻如化。修行者法身與佛等也。

何名摩訶？摩訶者是大，心量廣大，猶如虛空。若空心禪，即落無記空。世界虛空，能含日月星辰、大地山河、一切草木、瓦石、人善人、惡法善法、天堂地獄，盡在空中。世人性空，亦復如是。

25.

性含萬法是大；萬法盡是自性。見一切人及非人、惡之與善、惡法善法，盡皆不捨，不可染著，猶如虛空，名之為大。此是摩訶。

迷人口念，智者心行。又有迷人空心不思，名之為大。此亦不是。心量大，不行是小。若口空說，不修此行，非我弟子。

26.

何名般若？般若是智慧。一切時中，念念不愚，常行智慧，即名般若行。一念愚即般若絕；一念智即般若生。世人心中常愚，自言我修般若。般若無形相，智慧性即是。

何名波羅蜜？此是西國梵音，唐言到彼岸，解義離生滅。著境生滅起，如水有波浪，即是為此岸；離境無生滅，如水永長流，故即名到彼岸，故名波羅蜜。

迷人口念，智者心行。當念時有妄，有妄即非真有。念念若行，是名真有。

悟此法者，悟般若法，修般若行。不修即凡。一念修行，法身等佛。善知識，即煩惱是菩提。前念迷即凡，後念悟即佛。

善知識，摩訶般若波羅蜜，最尊最上第一，無住無去無來，三世諸佛從中出，將大智慧到彼岸，打破五陰煩惱塵勞。

最尊最上第一。讚最上乘法，修行定成佛。無去無住無來往，是定慧等，不染一切法，三世諸佛從中出，變三毒為戒定慧。

27.

善知識，我此法門從般若生八萬四千智慧。何以故？為世人有八萬四千塵勞。若無塵勞，般若常在，不離自性。

悟此法者，即是無念，無憶，無著。莫起雜妄，即自是真如性。用智慧觀照，於一切法不取不捨，即見性成佛道。

28.

善知識，若欲入甚深心法界，入般若三昧者，直須修般若波羅蜜行，但持《金剛般若波羅蜜經》一卷，即得見性入般若三昧。當知此人功德無量。經中分明讚嘆，不能具說。

此是最上乘法，為大智上根人說。小根智人若聞法，必不生信。何以故？譬如大龍，若下大雨，雨於閭浮提，城邑聚落，悉皆滂流，如漂草葉；若下大雨，雨於大海，不增不減。

若大乘者，聞說《金剛經》，心開悟解。故知本性自有般若之智，自用智慧觀照，不假文字。譬如其雨水，不從天有，元是龍王於江海中將身引此水，令一切眾生，一切草木，一切有情無情，悉皆蒙潤。諸水眾流，却入大海。海納眾水，合為一體。眾生本性般若之智，亦復如是。

29.

小根之人，聞說此頓教，猶如大地草木根性自小者，若被大雨一沃，速皆自倒，不能增長；小根之人亦復如是。有般若之智與大智之人，亦無差別，因何聞法即不悟？緣邪見障重，煩惱根深，猶如大雲蓋覆於日，不得風吹，日無能現。

般若之智亦無大小。為一切眾生自有迷心，外修覓佛，未悟自性，即是小根人。聞其頓教，不假外修，但於自心，令自本性常起正見，一切邪見煩惱塵勞眾生，當時盡悟，猶如大海納於眾流，小水大水合為一體，即是見性。內外不住，來去自由，能除執心，通達無礙。必修此行，即與《般若波羅蜜經》本無差別。

30.



一切經書及文字，大小二乘十二部經，皆因人置，因智慧性故，故能建立。若無世人，一切萬法本亦不有。故知萬法，本從人興；一切經書，因人說有。

緣在人中，有愚有智。愚為小人，智為大人。迷人問於智者，智人與愚人說法，令彼愚者悟解心開。迷人若悟解心開，與大智人無別。

故知不悟，即佛是眾生；一念若悟，即眾生是佛。故知一切萬法盡在自身心中。何不從於自心，頓見真如本性。

《菩薩戒經》云：我本源自性清淨。識心見性，自成佛道。《淨名經》云：即時豁然，還得本心。

善知識，我於忍和尚處一聞，言下大悟，頓見真如本性。是故將此教法流行後代，令學道者頓悟菩提，各自觀心，令自本性頓悟。若不能自悟者，須覓大善知識示道見性。

何名大善知識？解最上乘法，直示正路，是大善知識，是大因緣。所為化道，令得見性。一切善法，皆因大善知識能發起故。

三世諸佛，十二部經，在人性中本自具有，不能自悟，須得善知識示道見性。若自悟者，不假外求善知識。若取外求善知識，望得解脫，無有是處。識自心內善知識，即得解脫。若自心邪迷，妄念顛倒，外善知識即有教授，救不可得。

汝若不得自悟，當起般若觀照，剎那間，妄念俱滅，即是自真正善知識，一悟即至佛地。自性心地，以智慧觀照，內外明徹，識自本心。若識本心，即是解脫。既得解脫，即是般若三昧。悟般若三昧，即是無念。

何名無念？無念法者，見一切法，不著一切法；遍一切處，不著一切處，常淨自性，使六賊從六門走出，於六塵中不離不染，來去自由，即是般若三昧，自在解脫，名無念行。若百物不思，當

令念絕，即是法縛，即名邊見。

悟無念法者，萬法盡通。悟無念法者，見諸佛境界。悟無念頓法者，至佛位地。

善知識，後代得吾法者，常見吾法身不離汝左右。善知識，將此頓教法門於同見同行，發願受持，如事佛教。終身受持而不退者，欲入聖位，然須傳受。從上已來，默然而付衣法，發大誓願，不退菩提，即須分付。

若不同見解，無有志願，在在處處，勿妄宣傳，損彼前人，究竟無益。若愚人解，謗此法門，百劫千生，斷佛種性。

33.

大師言：「善知識，聽吾說〈無相頌〉，令汝迷者罪滅。亦名〈滅罪頌〉。」頌曰：

愚人修福不修道，謂言修福便是道。  
布施供養福無邊，心中三惡元來造。

若將修福欲滅罪，後世得福罪元在。  
若解向心除罪緣，各自性中真懺悔。

若悟大乘真懺悔，除邪行正即無罪。  
學道之人能自觀，即與悟人同一類。

大師今傳此頓教，願學之人同一體。  
若欲當來覓本身，三毒惡緣心裏洗。

努力修道莫悠悠，忽然虛度一世休。  
若遇大乘頓教法，虔誠合掌至心求。

大師說法了，韋使君、官僚、僧眾、道俗，讚言無盡，皆所未聞。

34.

使君禮拜，白言：「和尚說法，實不思議。弟子嘗有少疑，欲問和尚，望意和尚大慈大悲，為弟子說。」

大師言：「有疑即問，何須再三。」

使君問：「〔和尚所說〕法，可不是西國第一祖達摩祖師宗旨？」

大師言：「是。」

使君問：「弟子見說達摩大師化梁武帝，帝問達摩：朕一生已來造寺、布施、供養，有功德否？達摩答言：並無功德。武帝惆悵，遂遣達摩出境。未審此言，請和尚說。」

六祖言：「實無功德，使君勿疑達摩大師言。武帝著邪道，不識正法。」

使君問：「何以無功德？」

和尚言：「造寺、布施、供養，只是修福，不可將福以為功德。功德在法身，非在於福田。自法性有功德。見性是功，平直是德，〔內見〕佛性，外行恭敬。若輕一切人，吾我不斷，即自無功德。自性虛妄，法身無功德。念念行平等直心，德即不輕。常行於敬，自修身即功，自修心即德。功德自心作，福與功德別。武帝不識正理，非祖大師有過。」

使君禮拜。又問：「弟子見僧俗常念阿彌陀佛，願往生西方。請和尚說得生彼否？望為破疑。」

大師言：「使君，聽慧能與說。世尊在舍衛城說西方引化，經文分明，去此不遠。只為下根說遠，說近只緣上智。人有兩種，法無兩般。迷悟有殊，見有遲疾。迷人念佛生彼，悟者自淨其心。所以佛言：隨其心淨則佛土淨。」

使君，東方人但淨心即無罪；西方人心不淨亦有愆，迷人願生東方。兩者所在處，並皆一種。心地但無不淨。西方去此不遠。心起不淨之心，念佛往生難到。除十惡即行十萬，無八邪即過八千，但行直心，到如彈指。

使君，但行十善，何須更願往生？不斷十惡之心，何佛即來迎請？若悟無生頓法，見西方只在剎那；不悟頓教大乘，念佛往生路遠，如何得達？」

六祖言：「慧能與使君移西方剎那間，目前便是。使君願見否？」

使君禮拜，〔言〕：「若此得見，何須往生。願和尚慈悲，為現西方，大善。」

大師言：「一時見西方，無疑即散。」大眾愕然，莫知何事。

大師曰：「大眾作意聽，世人自色身是城，眼耳鼻舌身即是城門。外有五門，內有意門。」心即是地，性即是王。性在王在，性去王無。性在身心存，性去身心壞。佛是自性作，莫向身外求。自性迷，佛即是眾生；自性悟，眾生即是佛。

慈悲即是觀音，喜捨名為勢至，能淨是釋迦，平直即是彌勒。人我即是須彌，邪心即是海水，煩惱即是波浪，毒心即是惡龍，麤勞即是魚鱉，虛妄即是鬼神，三毒即是地獄，愚癡即是畜生，十善即是天堂。

無人我，須彌自倒；除邪心，海水竭；煩惱無，波浪滅；毒害除，魚龍絕。自心地上覺性如來，施大智慧光明，照耀六門清淨，照破六欲諸天下，照三毒若除，地獄一時消滅。內外明徹，不異西方。不作此修，如何到彼？」

座下聞說，讚聲徹天，應是迷人了然便見。使君禮拜，讚言：「善哉！善哉！普願法界眾生，聞者一時悟解。」

大師言：「善知識，若欲修行，在家亦得，不由在寺。在寺不修，如西方心惡之人。在家若修行，如東方人修善，但願自家修清淨，即是西方。」

使君問：「和尚，在家如何修？願為指授。」

大師言：「善知識，慧能與道合作〈無相頌〉，盡誦取。依此修行，常與慧能一處無別。」頌曰：

說通及心通，如日處虛空，  
惟傳頓教法，出世破邪宗。  
教即無頓漸，迷悟有遲疾，  
若學頓法門，愚人不可悉。

說即雖萬般，合理還歸一，  
煩惱關宅中，常須生慧日。  
邪來因煩惱，正來煩惱除，  
邪正悉不用，清淨至無餘。

菩提本清淨，起心即是妄，  
淨性於妄中，但正除三障。  
世間若修道，一切盡不妨，  
常見在己過，與道即相當。

色類自有道，離道別覓道，  
覓道不見道，到頭還自懊。  
若欲覓真道，行正即是道，  
自若無正心，暗行不見道。

若真修道人，不見世間過，  
若見世間非，自非却是左。  
他非我不罪，我非自有罪，  
但自去非心，打破煩惱碎。

若欲化愚人，事須有方便，  
勿令彼有疑，即是菩提現。  
法元在世間，於世出世間，  
勿離世間上，外求出世間。

邪見在世間，正見出世間，  
邪正悉打却，菩提性宛然。  
此但是頓教，亦名為大乘，  
迷來經累劫，悟即剎那間。



大師言：「善知識，汝等盡誦取此偈，依此偈修行，去慧能千里，常在能邊。依此不修，對面千里遠。各各自修，法不相待。」

眾人且散，慧能歸漕溪山。眾生若有大疑，來彼山間，為汝破疑，同見佛性。」

合座官僚道俗，禮拜和尚，無不嗟嘆：「善哉大悟，昔所未聞。嶺南有福，生佛在此，誰能得知。」一時盡散。

38.

大師住漕溪山，韶、廣二州行化四十餘年。若論門人，僧之與俗，約有三五千人，說不可盡。若

論宗旨，傳授《壇經》，以此為依約。若不得《壇經》，即無稟受。須知去處，年月日、姓名，遞相付囑。無《壇經》稟承，非南宗弟子也。未得稟承者，雖說頓教法，未知根本，終不免諍。但得法者，只勸修行。諍是勝負之心，與佛道違背。

39.

世人盡傳南能北秀，未知根本事由。且秀禪師於南荊府當陽縣玉泉寺住持修行，慧能大師於韶州城東三十五里漕溪山住。法即一宗，人有南北，因此便立南北。

何以頓漸？法即一種，見有遲疾，見遲即漸，見疾即頓。法無頓漸，人有利鈍，故名漸頓。

40.

神秀師常見人說慧能法疾，直指見路。秀師遂喚門人僧志誠曰：「汝聰明多智。汝與吾至漕溪山到慧能所，禮拜但聽，莫言吾使汝來。所聽得意旨，記取却來與吾說，看慧能見解與吾誰疾遲。汝第一早來，勿令吾怪。」

志誠奉使歡喜，遂行。半月中間，即至漕溪山，見慧能和尚，禮拜即聽，不言來處。志誠聞法，言下便悟，即契本心，起立即禮拜，白言：「和尚，弟子從玉泉寺來。秀師處，不得契悟。聞和尚說，便契本心。和尚慈悲，願當教示。」

慧能大師曰：「汝從彼來，應是細作。」

志誠曰：「不是。」

六祖曰：「何以不是？」

志誠曰：「未說時即是，說了即不是。」

六祖言：「煩惱即是菩提，亦復如是。」

41.

大師謂志誠曰：「吾聞汝禪師教人唯傳戒定慧。汝和尚教人戒定慧如何？當為吾說。」

志誠曰：「秀和尚言戒定慧，諸惡不作名為戒，諸善奉行名為慧，自淨其意名為定。此即名為戒定慧。彼作如是說，不知和尚所見如何？」

慧能和尚答曰：「此說不可思議。慧能所見又別。」

志誠問：「何以別？」

慧能答曰：「見有遲疾。」

志誠讀和尚說所見戒定慧。

大師言：「汝聽吾說，看吾所見處：心地無非自性戒，心地無亂自性定，心地無癡自性慧。」

大師言：「汝師戒定慧勸小根智人，吾戒定慧勸上智人，得悟自性，亦不立戒定慧。」

志誠言：「讀大師說不立如何？」

大師言：「自性無非無亂無癡，念念般若觀照，常離法相，有何可立？自性頓修，亦無漸次，所以不立。」

志誠禮拜，便不離漕溪山，即為門人，不離大師左右。

又有一僧名法達，常誦《妙法蓮華經》七年，心迷不知正法之處。來至漕溪山，禮拜，問大師言：「弟子常誦《妙法蓮華經》七年，心迷不知正法之處，經上有疑。大師智慧廣大，願為除疑。」

大師言：「法達，法即甚達，汝心不達。經上無疑，汝心自疑。汝心自邪，而求正法。吾心正定，即是持經。吾一生已來，不識文字。汝將《法華經》來，對吾讀一遍，吾聞即知。」

法達取經，對大師讀一遍。六祖聞已，即識佛意，便與法達說《法華經》。

六祖言：「法達，《法華經》無多語，七卷盡是譬喻因緣。如來廣說三乘，只為世人根鈍；經文分明，無有餘乘，唯有一佛乘。」

大師〔言〕：「法達，汝聽一佛乘，莫求二佛乘，迷却汝性。經中何處是一佛乘？吾與汝說。經云：諸佛世尊，唯以一大事因緣故，出現於

世。(以上十六字是正法)。此法如何解？此法如何修？汝聽吾說。

人心不思本源空寂，離却邪見，即一大事因緣。內外不迷，即離兩邊。外迷著相，內迷著空，於相離相，於空離空，即是內外不迷。

若悟此法，一念心開。出現於世，心開何物？開佛知見。佛猶覺也，分為四門：開覺知見，示覺知見，悟覺知見，入覺知見。開、示、悟、入，從一處入，即覺知見，見自本性，即得出世。」

大師言：「法達，吾常願一切世人心地常自開佛知見，莫開眾生知見。世人心邪，愚迷造惡，自開眾生知見；世人心正，起智慧觀照，自開佛知見。莫開眾生知見，開佛知見，即出世。」

大師言：「法達，此是《法華經》一乘法，向下分三，為迷人故。汝但依一佛乘。」

大師言：「法達，心行轉《法華》，不行《法華》轉；心正轉《法華》，心邪《法華》轉；開佛知見轉《法華》，開眾生知見被《法華》轉。」

大師言：「努力依法修行，即是轉經。」

法達一聞，言下大悟，涕淚悲泣，自言：「和尚，實未曾轉《法華》，七年被《法華》轉。已後轉《法華》，念念修行佛行。」

大師言：「即佛行是佛。」其時聽人無不悟者。

時有一僧名智常，來漕溪山禮拜和尚，問四乘法義。

智常問和尚曰：「佛說三乘，又言最上乘。弟子不解，望為教示。」

慧能大師曰：「汝自身心見，莫著外法相。元無四乘法。人心量四等，法有四乘。

見聞讀誦是小乘；悟法解義是中乘；依法修行是大乘；萬法盡通，萬行俱備，一切不離，但離法

相，作無所得，是最上乘。最上乘是最上行義，不在口諍。汝須自修，莫問吾也。」

又有一僧名神會，南陽人也，至漕溪山禮拜，問言：「和尚坐禪，見不見？」

大師起，把打神會三下，却問神會：「吾打汝，痛不痛？」

神會答言：「亦痛亦不痛。」

六祖言曰：「吾亦見亦不見。」

神會又問大師：「何以亦見亦不見？」

大師言：「吾亦見〔者〕，常見自過患，故云亦見；亦不見者，不見天地人過罪，所以亦見亦不見也。汝亦痛亦不痛如何？」

神會答曰：「若不痛，即同無情木石；若痛，即同凡夫，即起於恨。」

大師言：「神會，向前見不見是兩邊，痛不痛是生滅。汝自性且不見，敢來弄人！」

神會禮拜，更不敢言。大師言：「汝心迷不見，問善知識覓路。汝心悟自見，依法修行。汝自迷不見自心，却來問慧能見否？吾不自知，代汝迷不得。汝若自見，〔豈〕代得我迷？何不自修，乃問吾見否？」

神會作禮，便為門人，不離漕溪山中，常在左右。

45.

大師遂喚門人法海、志誠、法達、智常、智通、志徹、志道、法珍、法如、神會。大師言：「汝等十弟子近前。汝等不同餘人。吾滅度後，汝各為一方師。吾教汝說法，不失本宗。」

舉三科法門，動用三十六對，出沒即離兩邊。說一切法，莫離於性相。若有人問法，出語盡雙，皆取對法，來去相因，究竟二法盡餘，更無去處。

三科法門者：陰、界、入。陰是五陰，界是十八界，入是十二入。

何名五陰？色陰、受陰、想陰、行陰、識陰是。

何名十八界？六塵、六門、六識。

何名十二入？外六塵、中六門。

何名六塵？色、聲、香、味、觸、法是。

何名六門？眼、耳、鼻、舌、身、意是。

法性起六識：眼識、耳識、鼻識、舌識、身識、意識；六門、六塵。

自性含萬法，名為含藏識。思量即轉識。生六識，出六門，見六塵，是三六十八。

由自性邪，起十八邪；若自性正，起十八正。若惡用即眾生，善用即佛。用由何等？由自性。



對。外境無情對有五：天與地對，日與月對，暗與明對，陰與陽對，水與火對。

語言法相對有十二對：有為無為對，有色無色對，有相無相對，有漏無漏對，色與空對，動與靜對，清與濁對，凡與聖對，僧與俗對，老與少對，長與短對，高與下對。

自性居起用對有十九對：邪與正對，癡與慧對，愚與智對，亂與定對，戒與非對，直與曲對，實與虛對，峻與平對，煩惱與菩提對，慈與害對，喜與瞋對，捨與慳對，進與退對，生與滅對，常與無常對，法身與色身對，化身與報身對，體與用對，性與相對，有情與無情對。

語言法相對有十二對，外境無情有五對，自性居起用有十九對，都合成三十六對也。此三十六對法，解用通一切經，出入即離兩邊，如何自性起用三十六對？

共人言語，出外於相離相，內入於空離空。著空則惟長無明，著相即惟長邪見。

謗法，直言不用文字。既云不用文字，人不合言語；言語即是文字。自性上說空，正語言本性不空，迷〔人〕自惑，語言除故。

暗不自暗，以明故暗；明不自明，以暗故明。以明變暗，以暗現明，來去相因。三十六對，亦復如是。

47.

大師言：「十弟子，已後傳法，遞相教授一卷《壇經》，不失本宗。不稟受《壇經》，非我宗旨。如今得了，遞代流行。得過《壇經》者，如見吾親授。」

十僧得教授已，寫為《壇經》，遞代流行。得者必當見性。

大師先天二年八月三日滅度。七月八日喚門人告別。大師先天元年於新州國恩寺造塔，至先天二年七月告別。

大師言：「汝眾近前，吾至八月欲離世間。汝等有疑早問，為汝破疑，當令迷盡，使汝安樂。吾若去後，無人教汝。」

法海等眾僧聞已，涕淚悲泣。唯有神會不動，亦不悲泣。六祖言：「神會小僧，却得善不善等，毀譽不動。餘者不得，數年山中，更修何道？汝今悲泣，更憂阿誰？憂吾不知去處在？若不知去處，終不別汝。汝等悲泣，即不知吾去處；若知去處，即不悲泣。」

性無生滅，無去無來。汝等盡坐，吾與汝一偈：《真假動靜偈》。汝等盡誦取此偈，意與吾同。依此修行，不失宗旨。」

僧眾禮拜，請大師留偈，敬心受持。偈曰：

一切無有真，不以見於真，  
若見於真者，是見盡非真。  
若能自有真，離假即心真，  
自心不離假，無真何處真。

有情即解動，無情即無動，  
若修不動行，同無情不動。

若見真不動，動上有不動，  
不動是不動，無情無佛種。

能善分別相，第一義不動，  
若悟作此見，則是真如用。  
報諸學道者，努力須用意，  
莫於大乘門，却執生死智。

前頭人相應，即共論佛義，  
若實不相應，合掌禮勤善。  
此教本無諍，若諍失道意，  
執迷諍法門，自性入生死。

眾僧既聞，識大師意，更不敢諍，依法修行。一時禮拜，即知大師不久住世。上座法海向前言：「大師，大師去後，衣法當付何人？」

大師言：「法即付了，汝不須問。吾滅後二十餘年，邪法緣亂，惑我宗旨。有人出來，不惜身命，定佛教是非，豎立宗旨，即是吾正法。」

衣不合傳。汝不信，吾與誦先代五祖《傳衣付法頌》。若據第一祖達摩頌意，即不合傳衣。聽吾與汝誦。」頌曰：

第一祖達摩和尚頌曰：

吾本來唐國，傳教救迷情，  
一花開五葉，結果自然成。

第二祖慧可和尚頌曰：

本來緣有地，從地種花生，  
當來元無地，花從何處生。

第三祖僧璨和尚頌曰：

花種須因地，地上種花生，  
花種無生性，於地亦無生。

第四祖道信和尚頌曰：

花種有生性，因地種花生，  
先緣不和合，一切盡無生。

第五祖弘忍和尚頌曰：

有情來下種，無情花即生，  
無情又無種，心地亦無生。

第六祖慧能和尚頌曰：

心地含情種，法雨即花生，  
自悟花情種，菩提果自成。

能大師言：「汝等聽吾作二頌，取達摩和尚頌意。汝迷人依此頌修行，必當見性。」

第一頌曰：

心地邪花放，五葉逐根隨，  
共造無明業，見被業風吹。

第二頌曰：

心地正花放，五葉逐根隨，  
共修般若慧，當采佛菩提。

六祖說偈已了，放眾生散。門入出外思惟，即知大師不久住世。

51.

六祖後至八月三日，食後，大師言：「汝等著位坐，吾今共汝等別。」

法海問言：「此頓教法傳受，從上已來至今幾代？」

六祖言：「初傳受七佛，釋迦牟尼佛第七，大迦葉第八，阿難第九，末田地第十，商那和修第十一，優婆鞠多第十二，提多迦第十三，佛陀難提第十四，佛陀密多第十五，脇比丘第十六，富那奢第十七，馬鳴第十八，毗羅長者第十九，龍樹第二十，迦那提婆第二十一，羅睺羅第二十二，僧伽那提第二十三，僧迦耶舍第二十四，鳩摩羅駄第二十五，闍耶多第二十六，婆修盤多第二十七，摩拏羅第二十八，鶴勒那第二十九，師子比丘第三十，舍那婆斯第三十一，優婆崛第三十二，僧伽羅第三十三，須婆密多第三十四，南天竺國王子第三太子菩提達摩第三十五。」

唐國僧慧可第三十六，僧璨第三十七，道信第三十八，弘忍第三十九，慧能自身當今受法第四十。」

大師言：「今日已後，遞相傳受，須有依約，莫失宗旨。」

52.

法海又曰：「大師今去，留付何法？令後代人如何見佛？」

六祖言：「汝聽，後代迷人但識眾生，即能見佛；若不識眾生，覓佛萬劫不可得也。吾今教汝識眾生見佛，更留《見真佛解脫頌》。迷即不見佛，悟者乃見。」

法海願聞，代代流傳，世世不絕。

六祖言：「汝聽，吾與汝說。後代世人，若欲覓佛，但識眾生，即能識佛。〔佛〕即緣有眾生，離眾生無佛心。

迷即佛眾生，悟即眾生佛。

愚癡佛眾生，智慧眾生佛。

心峻佛眾生，平等眾生佛。

一生心若峻，佛在眾生中。

一念悟若平，即眾生自佛。

我心自有佛，自佛是真佛。

自若無佛心，向何處求佛。

53.

婬性本是淨性因，除婬即無淨性身。  
性中但自離五欲，見性剎那即是真。  
今生若悟頓教門，悟即眼前見世尊。  
若欲修行求覓佛，不知何處欲覓真。  
若能身中自有真，有真即是成佛因。  
自不求真外覓佛，去覓總是大癡人。  
頓教法者是西流，救度世人須自修。  
今報世間學道者，不於此見大悠悠。

大師說偈已了，遂告門人曰：「汝等好住，今共汝別。吾去已後，莫作世情悲泣而受人弔問、錢帛，著孝衣，即非聖法，非我弟子。如吾在日一種。一時端坐，但無動無靜，無生無滅，無去無來，無是無非，無住無往，坦然寂靜，即是大道。吾去已後，但依法修行，共吾在日一種。吾若在世，汝違教法，吾住無益。」

大師言此語已，夜至三更，奄然遷化。大師春秋七十有六。

54.

大師滅度之日，寺內異香氛氲，數日不散；山崩地動，林木變白，日月無光，風雲失色。

八月三日滅度，至十一月迎和尚神座於漕溪山，葬於龍龕之內。白光出現，直上衝天，三日始散。韶州刺史韋璩立碑，至今供養。

55.

此《壇經》，法海上座集。上座無常，付同學道際；道際無常，付門人悟真；悟真在嶺南漕溪山法興寺，現今傳授此法。

56.

如付此法，須得上根智，深信佛法，立於大悲。  
持此經以為稟承，於今不絕。

57.

和尚本是韶州曲江縣人也。如來入涅槃，法教流  
東土，共傳無住〔法〕，即我心無住。此真菩薩  
說，真實示行喻，唯教大智人，示旨於凡度。

誓〔願〕修行，遭難不退，過苦能忍，福德深  
厚，方授此法。如根性不堪，材量不得，雖求此

法，違立不得者，不得妄付《壇經》。告諸同道  
者，令知密意。

南宗頓教最上大乘壇經一卷



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