

Chan Buddhism

Bodhidharma

Bloodstream Sermon

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EVERYTHING that appears in the three realms comes from the mind. Hence buddhas of the past and future teach mind to mind without bothering about definitions!

But if they don't define it, what do they mean by mind?

You ask. That's your mind. I answer. That's my mind. If I had no mind, how could I answer? If you had no mind, how could you ask? That which asks is your mind. Through endless kalpas without beginning, whatever you do, wherever you are, that's your real mind, that's your real buddha. *This mind is the buddha* says the same thing. 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, the absence of cause and effect, is what's meant by 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.

Trying to find a buddha or enlightenment is like trying to grab space. Space has a name but no form. It's not something you can pick up or put down.

And you certainly can't grab it. Beyond this mind you'll never see a buddha. The buddha is a product of your mind. Why look for a buddha beyond this mind?

Buddhas of the past and future only talk about this mind. The mind is the buddha, and the buddha is the mind. Beyond the mind there's no buddha, and beyond the buddha there's no mind. If you think there's a buddha beyond the mind, where is he? There's no buddha beyond the mind, so why envision one? You can't know your real mind as long as you deceive yourself. As long as you're enthralled by a lifeless form, you're not free. If you don't believe me, deceiving yourself won't help. It's not the buddha's fault. People, though, are deluded. They're unaware that their own mind is the buddha. Otherwise they wouldn't look for a buddha outside the mind.



Hui-neng cutting the bamboo. Liang K'ai, early 13th century.

Buddhas don't save buddhas. If you use your mind to look for a buddha, you won't see the buddha. As long as you look for a buddha somewhere else, you'll never see that your own mind is the buddha. Don't use a buddha to worship a buddha. And don't use the mind to invoke a buddha. Buddhas don't recite sutras. Buddhas don't keep precepts. And buddhas don't break precepts. Buddhas don't keep or break anything. Buddhas don't do good or evil.

To find a buddha, you have to see your nature. Whoever sees his nature is a buddha. If you don't see your nature, invoking buddhas, reciting sutras, making offerings, and keeping precepts are all useless. Invoking buddhas results in good karma, reciting sutras results in a good memory; keeping precepts results in a good rebirth, and making offerings results in future blessings—but no buddha.

If you don't understand by yourself, you'll have to find a teacher to get to the bottom of life and death. But unless he sees his nature, such a person isn't a teacher. Even if he can recite the Twelvefold Canon, he can't escape the Wheel of Birth and Death. He suffers in the three realms without hope of release.

Long ago, the monk Good Star was able to recite the entire Canon. But he didn't escape the Wheel, because he didn't see his nature. If this was the case with Good Star, then people nowadays who recite a few sutras or shastras and think it's the Dharma are fools. Unless you see your mind, reciting so much prose is useless.

To find a buddha all you have to do is see your nature. Your nature is the buddha. And the buddha is the person who's free: free of plans, free of cares. If you don't see your nature and run around all day looking somewhere else, you'll never find a buddha. The truth is, there's nothing to find. But to reach such an understanding you need a teacher and you need to struggle to make yourself understand. Life and death are important. Don't suffer them in vain. There's no advantage in deceiving yourself. Even if you have mountains of jewels and as many servants as there are grains of sand along the Ganges, you see them when your eyes are open. But what about when your eyes are shut? You should realize then that everything you see is like a dream or illusion.

If you don't find a teacher soon, you'll live this life in vain. It's true, you have the buddha-nature. But without the help of a teacher you'll never know it. Only one person in a million becomes enlightened without a teacher's help.

If, though, by the conjunction of conditions, someone understands what the Buddha meant, that person doesn't need a teacher. Such a person has a natural awareness superior to anything taught. But unless you're so blessed, study hard, and by means of instruction you'll understand.

People who don't understand and think they can do so without study are no different from those deluded souls who can't tell white from black. Falsely proclaiming the Buddhadharma, such persons in fact blaspheme the Buddha and subvert the Dharma. They preach as if they were bringing rain. But theirs is the preaching of devils, not of buddhas. Their teacher is the King of Devils and their disciples are the Devil's minions. Deluded people who follow such instruction unwittingly sink deeper in the Sea of Birth and Death.

Unless they see their nature, how can people call themselves buddhas? They're liars who deceive others into entering the realm of devils. Unless they see their nature, their preaching of the Twelvefold Canon is nothing but the preaching of devils. Their allegiance is to Mara, not to the Buddha. Unable to distinguish white from black, how can they escape birth and death?

Whoever sees his nature is a buddha; whoever doesn't is a mortal. But if you can find your buddha-nature apart from your mortal nature, where is it? Our mortal nature is our buddha-nature. Beyond this nature there's no buddha. The buddha is our nature. There's no buddha besides this nature. And there's no nature besides the buddha.

But suppose I don't see my nature, can't I still attain enlightenment by invoking buddhas, reciting sutras, making offerings, observing precepts, practicing devotions, or doing good works?

No, you can't.

Why not?

If you attain anything at all, it's conditional, it's karmic. It results in retribution. It turns the Wheel And as long as you're subject to birth and death, you'll never attain enlightenment. To attain enlightenment you have to see your nature. Unless you see your nature, all this talk about cause and effect is nonsense. Buddhas don't practice nonsense. A buddha is free of karma, free of cause and effect. To say he attains anything at all is to slander a buddha. What could he possibly attain? Even focusing on a mind, a power, an understanding, or a view is impossible for a buddha. A buddha isn't one-sided. The nature of his mind is basically empty (*wu*), neither pure nor impure. He's free of practice and realization. He's free of cause and effect.

A buddha doesn't observe precepts. A buddha doesn't do good or evil. A buddha isn't energetic or lazy. A buddha is someone who does nothing, someone who can't even focus his mind on a buddha. A buddha isn't a buddha. Don't think about buddhas. If you don't see what I'm talking about, you'll never know your own mind.

People who don't see their nature and imagine they can practice thoughtlessness all the time are liars and fools. They fall into endless space. They're like drunks. They can't tell good from evil. If you intend to cultivate such a practice, you have to see your nature before you can put an end to rational thought. To attain enlightenment without seeing your nature is impossible.

Still others commit all sorts of evil deeds, claiming karma doesn't exist. They erroneously maintain that since everything is empty (*wu*), committing evil isn't wrong. Such persons fall into a hell of endless darkness with no hope of release. Those who are wise hold no such conception.

But if our every movement or state, whenever it occurs, is the mind, why don't we see this mind when a person's body dies?

The mind is always present. You just don't see it.

But if the mind is present, why don't I see it?

Do you ever dream?

Of course.

When you dream, is that you?

Yes, it's me.

And is what you're doing and saying different from you?

No, *it isn't.*

But if it isn't, then this body is your real body. And this real body is your mind. And this mind, through endless kalpas without beginning, has never varied. It has never lived or died, appeared, or disappeared, increased or decreased. It's not pure or impure, good or evil, past or future. It's not true or false. It's not male or female. It doesn't appear as a monk or a layman, an elder or a novice, a sage or a fool, a buddha or a mortal. It strives for no realization and suffers no karma. It has no strength or form. It's like space. You can't possess it and you can't lose it. Its movements can't be blocked by mountains, rivers, or rock walls. Its unstoppable powers penetrate the Mountain of Five Skandhas and cross the River of Samsara. No karma can restrain this real body. But this mind is subtle and hard to see. It's not the same as the sensual mind. Everyone wants to see this mind, and those who move their hands and feet by its light are as many as the grains of sand along the Ganges, but when you ask them, they can't explain it. They're like puppets. It's theirs to use. Why don't they see it?

The Buddha said people are deluded. This is why when they act they fall into the River of Endless Rebirth. And when they try to get out, they only sink deeper. And all because they don't see their nature. If people weren't deluded, why would they ask about something right in front of them? Not one of them understands the movement of his own hands and feet. The Buddha wasn't mistaken. Deluded people don't know who they are. Something so hard to fathom is known by a buddha and no one else. Only the wise know this mind, this mind called dharma-nature, this mind called liberation. Neither life nor death can restrain this mind. Nothing can. It's also called the Unstoppable Tathagata, the Incomprehensible, the Sacred Self, the Immortal, the Great Sage. Its names vary but not its essence. Buddhas vary too, but none leaves his own mind.

The mind's capacity is limitless, and its manifestations are inexhaustible. Seeing forms with your eyes, hearing sounds with your ears, smelling odors with your nose, tasting flavors with your tongue, every movement or state is all your mind. At every moment, where language can't go, that's your mind.

The sutras say, "A tathagata's forms are endless. And so is his awareness." The endless variety of forms is due to the mind. Its ability to distinguish things, whatever their movement or state, is the mind's awareness. But the mind has no form and its awareness no limit. Hence it's said, "A tathagata's forms are endless. And so is his awareness."

A material body of the four elements is trouble. A material body is subject to birth and death. But the real body exists without existing, because a tathagata's real body never changes. The sutras say, "People should realize that the buddha-nature is something they have always had." Kashyapa only realized his own nature.

Our nature is the mind. And the mind is our nature. This nature is the same as the mind of all buddhas. Buddhas of the past and future only transmit this mind. Beyond this mind there's no buddha anywhere. But deluded people don't realize that their own mind is the buddha. They keep searching outside. They never stop invoking buddhas or worshipping buddhas and wondering *Where is the buddha?* Don't indulge in such illusions. Just know your mind. Beyond your mind there's no other buddha. The sutras say, "Everything that has form is an illusion." They also say, "Wherever you are, there's a buddha." Your mind is the buddha. Don't use a buddha to worship a buddha.

Even if a buddha or bodhisattva should suddenly appear before you, there's no need for reverence. This mind of ours is empty and contains no such form. Those who hold onto appearances are devils. They fall from the Path. Why worship illusions born of the mind? Those who worship don't know, and those who know don't worship. By worshipping you come under the spell of devils. I point this out because I'm afraid you're unaware of it. The basic nature of a buddha has no such form. Keep this in mind, even if something unusual should appear. Don't embrace it, and don't fear it, and don't doubt that your mind is basically pure. Where could there be room for any such form? Also, at the appearance of spirits, demons, or divine beings, conceive neither respect nor fear. Your mind is basically empty. All appearances are illusions. Don't hold on to appearances.

If you envision a buddha, a dharma, or a bodhisattva and conceive respect for them, you relegate yourself to the realm of mortals. If you seek direct understanding, don't hold on to any appearance whatsoever, and you'll succeed. I have no other advice. The sutras say, "All appearances are illusions." They have no fixed existence, no constant form. They're impermanent. Don't cling to appearances, and you'll be of one mind with the Buddha. The sutras say, "That which is free of all form is the buddha."

But why shouldn't we worship buddhas and bodhisattvas?

Devils and demons possess the power of manifestation. They can create the appearance of bodhisattvas in all sorts of guises. But they're false. None of them are buddhas. The buddha is your own mind. Don't misdirect your worship.

Buddha is Sanskrit for what you call *aware, miraculously aware*. Responding, perceiving, arching your brows, blinking your eyes, moving your hands and feet, it's all your miraculously aware nature. And this nature is the mind. And the mind is the buddha. And the buddha is the path (*Dao*). And the path (*Dao*) is zen (*chan*). But the word *zen* is one that remains a puzzle to both mortals and sages. Seeing your nature is zen. Unless you see your nature, it's not zen. . . .

The Zen Teaching of Bodhidharma. Red Pine, trans. New York: North Point Press, 1987.

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The Platform Sutra

[This first part of *The Platform Sutra* recounts the story of how Hui-neng became the Sixth Patriarch of Chan Buddhism. Hui-neng, who is depicted as an illiterate, manual laborer from a barbarian village, ends up being the one who earns the Ancestor's robe and bowl (the sign of the Patriarch) in demonstrating the perfection of wisdom (*prajñāpāramitā*) in his verse brilliantly expressing *sūnyatā*, the fundamental emptiness of all things.]

Once, when the Patriarch had arrived at Pao-un Monastery, Prefect Wei of Shao-chou and other officials went there to ask him to deliver public lectures on Buddhism in the hall of Ta-fan temple in the city [Canton].

In due course, there were assembled [in the lecture hall] Prefect Wei, government officials, and Confucian scholars, about thirty each, and *bhikshus*, *bhikshunis*, Taoists, and laymen to the number of about one thousand. After the patriarch had taken his seat, the congregation in a body paid him homage and asked him to preach on the fundamental laws of Buddhism, whereupon His Holiness delivered the following address:

Learned Audience, our essence of mind [literally, self-nature], which is the seed or kernel of enlightenment [*bodhi*], is pure by nature, and by making use of this mind alone we can reach buddhahood directly. Now let me tell you something about my own life and how I came into possession of the esoteric teaching of the Dhyana [*Ch'an*] school.

My father, a native of Fan-yang, was dismissed from his official post and banished to be a commoner in Hsin-chou in Kwangtung. I was unlucky in that my father died when I was very young, leaving my mother poor and miserable. We moved to Kuang-chou [Canton] and were then in very bad circumstances.

I was selling firewood in the market one day, when one of my customers ordered some to be brought to his shop. Upon delivery being made and payment received, I left the shop, outside of which I found a man reciting a sutra. As soon as I heard the text of this sutra my mind at once became enlightened. Thereupon I asked the man the name of the book he was reciting and was told that it was the *Diamond Sutra*. I further inquired whence he came and why he recited this particular sutra. He replied that he came from Tung-shan monastery in the Huang-mei district of Ch'i-chou; that the abbot in charge of this temple was Hung-jen, the fifth patriarch; that there were about one

thousand disciples under him; and that when he went there to pay homage to the patriarch, he attended lectures on this sutra. He further told me that His Holiness used to encourage the laity as well as the monks to recite this scripture, as by doing so they might realize their own essence of mind, and thereby reach buddhahood directly.

It must be due to my good karma in past lives that I heard about this, and that I was given ten taels for the maintenance of my mother by a man who advised me to go to Huang-mei to interview the fifth patriarch. After arrangements had been made for her, I left for Huang-mei, which took me less than thirty days to reach.

I then went to pay homage to the patriarch, and was asked where I came from and what I expected to get from him. I replied, "I am a commoner from Hsin-chou of Kwangtung. I have traveled far to pay you respect and I ask for nothing but buddhahood. "

"You are a native of Kwangtung, a barbarian? How can you expect to be a buddha?"

I replied: "Although there are northern men and southern men, north and south make no difference to their buddhanature. A barbarian is different from Your Holiness physically, but there is no difference in our buddha-nature."

He was going to speak further to me, but the presence of other disciples made him stop short. He then ordered me to join the crowd to work.

"May I tell Your Holiness," said I, "that *prajna* [transcendental wisdom] often rises in my mind. When one does not go astray from one's own essence of mind, one may be called the 'field of merits.' I do not know what work Your Holiness would ask me to do."

"This barbarian is too-bright," he remarked. "Go to the stable and speak no more." I then withdrew myself to the backyard and was told by a lay brother to split firewood and to pound rice.

More than eight months after, the patriarch saw me one day and said, "I know your knowledge of Buddhism is very sound, but I have to refrain from speaking to you lest evildoers should do you harm. Do you understand?"

"Yes, sir, I do," I replied: "To avoid people taking notice of me, I dare not go near your hall."

The patriarch one day assembled all his disciples and said to them, "The question of incessant rebirth is a momentous one. Day after day, instead of trying to free yourselves from this bitter sea of life and death, you seem to go after tainted merits only [i.e., merits that cause rebirth]. Yet merits will be of no help if your essence of mind is obscured. Go and seek for *prajna* in your own mind and then write me a stanza about it. He who understands what the essence of mind is will be given the robe [the insignia of the patriarchate] and the Dharma [i.e., the esoteric teaching of the Dhyana school], and I shall make him the sixth patriarch. Go away quickly. Delay not in writing the stanza, as deliberation is quite unnecessary and of no use. The man who has realized the essence of mind can speak of it at once, as soon as he is spoken to about it; and he cannot lose sight of it, even when engaged in battle."

Having received this instruction, the disciples withdrew and said to one another, "It is of no use for us to concentrate our mind to write the stanza and submit it to His Holiness, since the patriarchate is bound to be won by Shen-hsiu, our instructor. And if we write perfunctorily, it will only be a waste of energy." Upon hearing this, all of them made up their minds not to write and said, "Why should we take the trouble? Hereafter, we will simply follow our instructor, Shen-hsiu, wherever he goes, and look to him for guidance."

Meanwhile, Shen-hsiu reasoned thus with himself: "Considering that I am their teacher, none of them will take part in the competition. I wonder whether I should write a stanza and submit it to His Holiness. If I do not, how can the patriarch know how deep or superficial my knowledge is? If my

object is to get the dharma, my motive is a pure one. If I were after the patriarchate, then it would be bad. In that case, my mind would be that of a worldlyling and my action would amount to robbing the patriarch's holy seat. But if I do not submit the stanza, I shall never have a chance of getting the dharma. A very difficult point to decide, indeed!"

In front of the patriarch's hall there were three corridors, the walls of which were to be painted by a court artist named Luchen with pictures from the *Lankavatara-sutra* depicting the transfiguration of the assembly, and with scenes showing the genealogy of the five patriarchs; for the information and veneration of the public.

When Shen-hsiu had composed his stanza he made several attempts to submit it to the patriarch, but as soon as he went near the hall his mind was so perturbed that he sweated all over. He could not screw up courage to submit it, although in the course of four days he made altogether thirteen attempts to do so.

Then he suggested to himself, "It would be better for me to write it on the wall of the corridor and let the patriarch see it for himself. If he approves it, I shall come out to pay homage, and tell him that it is done by me; but if he disapproves it, then I shall have wasted several years in this mountain in receiving homage from others that I by no means deserve! In that case, what progress have I made in learning Buddhism?"

At twelve o'clock that night he went secretly with a lamp to write the stanza on the wall of the south corridor, so that the patriarch might know what spiritual insight he had attained. The stanza read:

Our body is the bodhi tree,
And our mind a mirror bright.
Carefully we wipe them hour by hour,
And let no dust alight.

As soon as he had written it he left at once for his room, so nobody knew what he had done. In his room he again pondered: "When the patriarch sees my stanza tomorrow and is pleased with it, I shall be ready for the dharma; but if he says that it is badly done, it will mean that I am unfit for the Dharma, owing to the misdeeds in previous lives that thickly becloud my mind. It is difficult to know what the patriarch will say about it!" In this vein he kept on thinking until dawn, as he could neither sleep nor sit at ease.

But the patriarch knew already that Shen-hsiu had not entered the door of enlightenment, and that he had not known the essence of mind.

In the morning, he sent for Lu-chen, the court artist, and went with him to the south corridor to have the walls there painted with pictures. By chance, he saw the stanza. "I am sorry to have troubled you to come so far," he said to the artist. "The walls need not be painted now, as the sutra says, 'All forms or phenomena are transient and illusive.' It will be better to leave the stanza here, so that people may study it and recite it. If they put its teaching into actual practice, they will be saved from the misery of being born in these evil realms of existence. The merit gained by one who practices it will be great indeed!"

He then ordered incense to be burned, and all his disciples to pay homage to it and to recite it, so that they might realize the essence of mind. After they had recited it, all of them exclaimed, "Well done!"

At midnight, the patriarch sent for Shen-hsiu to come to the hall, and asked him whether the stanza was written by him or not.

"It was, sir," replied Shen-hsiu. "I dare not be so vain as to expect to get the patriarchate, but I wish Your Holiness would kindly tell me whether my stanza shows the least grain of wisdom. "

"Your stanza," replied the patriarch, "shows that you have not yet realized the essence of mind. So far you have reached the door of enlightenment, but you have not yet entered it. To seek for supreme enlightenment with such an understanding as yours can hardly be successful.

"To attain supreme enlightenment, one must be able to know spontaneously one's own nature or essence of mind, which is neither created nor can it be annihilated. From *kshana* to *kshana* [thought moment to thought moment], one should be able to realize the essence of mind all the time. All things will then be free from restraint [i.e., emancipated]. Once the *Tathata* [suchness, another name for the essence of mind] is known, one will be free from delusion forever; and in all circumstances one's mind is absolute truth. If you can see things in such a frame of mind you will have known the essence of mind, which is supreme enlightenment.

"You had better go back to think it over again for a couple of days, and then submit me another stanza. If your stanza shows that you have entered the door of enlightenment, I will transmit to you the robe and the Dharma."

Shen-hsiu made obeisance to the patriarch and left. For several days, he tried in vain to write another stanza. This upset his mind so much that he was as ill at ease as if he were in a nightmare, and he could find comfort neither in sitting nor in walking.

Two days after, it happened that a young boy who was passing by the room where I was pounding rice recited loudly the stanza written by Shen-hsiu. As soon as I heard it, I knew at once that the composer of it had not yet realized the essence of mind. For although I had not been taught about it at that time, I already had a general idea of it.

"What stanza is this?" I asked the boy.

"You barbarian," he replied, "don't you know about it? The patriarch told his disciples that the question of incessant rebirth was a momentous one, that those who wished to inherit his robe and dharma should write him a stanza, and that the one who had an understanding of the essence of mind would get them and be made the sixth patriarch. Elder Shen-hsiu wrote this formless stanza on the wall of the south corridor and the patriarch told us to recite it. He also said that those who put its teaching into actual practice would attain great merit, and be saved from the misery of being born in the evil realms of existence."

I told the boy that I wished to recite the stanza too, so that I might have an affinity with its teaching in future life. I also told him that although I had been pounding rice there for eight months I had never been to the hall, and that he would have to show me where the stanza was to enable me to make obeisance to it.

The boy took me there and I asked him to read it to me, as I am illiterate. A petty officer of the Chiang-chou district named Chang Tih-yung, who happened to be there, read it out to me. When he had finished reading I told him that I also had composed a stanza, and asked him to write it for me. "Extraordinary indeed," he exclaimed, "that you also can compose a stanza!"

"Don't despise a beginner," said I, "if you are a seeker of supreme enlightenment. You should know that the lowest class may have the sharpest wit, while the highest may be in want of intelligence. If you slight others, you commit a very great sin."

"Dictate your stanza," said he. "I will take it down for you. But do not forget to deliver me, should you succeed in getting the dharma!"

My stanza read:

There is no bodhi tree,
Nor stand of a mirror bright.
Since all is void,
Where can the dust alight?

"When he had written this, all disciples and others who were present were greatly surprised. Filled with admiration, they said to one another, "How wonderful! No doubt we should not judge people by appearance. How can it be that for so long we have made a bodhisattva incarnate work for us?"

Seeing that the crowd was overwhelmed with amazement, the patriarch rubbed off the stanza with his shoe, lest jealous ones should do me injury. He expressed the opinion, which they took for granted, that the author of this stanza had also not yet realized the essence of mind.

Next day, the patriarch came secretly to the room where the rice was pounded. Seeing that I was working there with a stone pestle, he said to me, "A seeker of the path risks his life for the dharma. Should he not do so?" Then he asked, "Is the rice ready?"

"Ready long ago," I replied, "only waiting for the sieve." He knocked the mortar thrice with his stick and left.

Knowing what his message meant, in the third watch of the night I went to his room. Using the robe as a screen so that none could see us, he expounded the *Diamond Sutra* to me. When he came to the sentence, "One should use one's mind in such a way that it will be free from any attachment," I at once became thoroughly enlightened, and realized that all things in the universe are the essence of mind itself.

"Who would have thought," I said to the patriarch, "that the essence of mind is intrinsically pure! Who would have thought that the essence of mind is intrinsically free from becoming or annihilation! Who would have thought that the essence of mind is intrinsically self-sufficient! Who would have thought that the essence of mind is intrinsically free from change! Who would have thought that all things are the manifestation of the essence of mind!"

Knowing that I had realized the essence of mind, the patriarch said, "For him who does not know his own mind there is no use learning Buddhism. On the other hand, if he knows his own mind and sees intuitively his own nature, he is a hero, a teacher of gods and men, a buddha."

Thus, to the knowledge of no one, the dharma was transmitted to me at midnight, and consequently I became the inheritor of the teaching of the Sudden school as well as of the robe and the begging bowl.

This selection taken from "The Enlightenment of Hui-neng," in *Entering the Stream: An Introduction to the Buddha and his Teachings*, Samuel Bercholz and Sherab Chodzin Kohn eds. (Boston: Shambala Press, 1993).

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