

Chan Buddhism

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Bodhidharma

According to Zen tradition, Bodhidharma, the first Chinese Zen ancestor and twenty-eighth Buddhist master in a lineage starting with the historical Buddha, transmitted Zen from India to China. He is generally thought to have died around 530 C.E. Although history offers no certain evidence about Bodhidharma's life, he remains, before fact and fiction, a pre-eminent archetype for the profound liberation science called Zen. In the treasury of Chinese Zen literature the question, "Why did Bodhidharma come from the west?" (Or "Why did the First Ancestor come from the west?") is literally synonymous with the words "what is the essential meaning of Zen?"

Bodhidharma's perilous journey from India to China to transmit the ultimate teaching of the Buddha offers enduring appeal, and is a precedent for the wayfaring spirit that graces Zen history. Traveling first to find—and then to spread—the true teaching is a tangible, breathing part of Zen's tradition and outlook. Zen combines this spirit with an element of rebellious iconoclasm, providing a special appeal to the restless young. As one of the schools of Mahayana, a Buddhist movement that heralds enlightenment and nirvana as the birthright of all beings, Zen retains an appeal that has historically crossed divisions of cast, class, and gender.

Born an Indian prince, Bodhidharma became a student of the twenty-seventh Indian ancestor of the Zen lineage, Prajñadharma. His teacher encouraged him to travel to China, and after some time, he set off by ship on a three-year journey to Guangzhou by way of the Straits of Malacca. Arriving in China during the late fifth century, the sage remained in southern China for several years, possibly learning Chinese, before traveling north.

Central to the Bodhidharma legend is his interview with Emperor Wu of the Liang dynasty. Their meeting is iconic—a definitive event that reflects early Zen's portrayal of itself as outside the Buddhist religious establishment. Later descriptions of the meeting, such as the first case of the *Blue Cliff Record*, provide little background of the circumstances of each of these historic figures. For this reason, the underlying significance of their meeting may not be apparent to audiences removed from their time. Some background information, therefore, may be helpful.

As mentioned in the introduction, an early record of Bodhidharma's life and thought by scholars to be relatively reliable is a text entitled the *Continued Biographies of Eminent Monks*, authored by a famous monk who was not of the Zen school named Dao Xuan (596-667). The biography Dao Xuan wrote about Bodhidharma, authored around the year 650, more than a century after Bodhidharma lived, is regarded as relatively impartial and more reliable than later accounts that glorified Bodhidharma's life.

The *Continual Biographies* introduces Bodhidharma as follows:

BODHIDHARMA: A Brahman from Southern India. His spiritual wisdom was expansive. All who heard him became enlightened. He was devoted to the Mahayana practice of the profound solitary mind. He attained high comprehension of all aspects of samadhi. Through compassion for this place [China] he taught the Yogacara [teachings]. He first arrived in South China during the Liu-Song dynasty [before 489 C.E.]. At the end of his life he again traveled to live under the Wei [the dynasty that ruled North China]. Wherever he went he taught Chan. . .



Bodhidharma Crossing the Yangzi River on a reed
Painter unknown, Japan, Nanbokucho period (1336-1392)

In various places in the *Continued Biographies* Dao Xuan offers evidence that Bodhidharma avoided contact with China's emperors. Dao Xuan says that Bodhidharma's followers were numerous "like a city," but emperors were unable to attract him to give lectures at their court. Historical evidence appears to support Dao Xuan's statements that Bodhidharma avoided China's imperial courts. While other missionary monks from India sought imperial patronage, there is no evidence that Bodhidharma did so. During the time Bodhidharma was in China the country was divided between two competing dynasties. The Wei dynasty ruled in the north of the country, while a succession of dynasties, including the Song, Qi, and Liang, ruled in the south. The emperors of these kingdoms were avowedly Buddhist, spending great sums to support the religion. In a country where winters are freezing cold, the need for support to build Buddhist monasteries was an overriding concern for the religion. Yet there is no evidence that Bodhidharma sought support from emperors or high court officials for this or any other purpose. Instead, the *Continued Biographies* indicates Bodhidharma spent much time teaching and practicing among "peaks and caves."

In contrast to Bodhidharma's mendicant life away from the centers of China's religious establishment, there is the story of Emperor Wu of the Liang dynasty, a figure of key historical and religious importance not just in China but for all of East Asia. Emperor Wu gained power after leading a rebellion against a vicious and incompetent Qi dynasty emperor who was guilty of murder and mayhem.

According to Chinese Buddhist tradition, shortly after gaining power Emperor Wu embraced Buddhism partly because his wife, who had recently died, appeared to him in a dream in the body of a large snake. From the dream she explained that she had undergone rebirth in a snake's body because of her sins during her life. She begged the emperor to help her escape her fate by appealing to the Buddha for help on her behalf. Emperor Wu ordered the creation and observance of a ceremony to try and save his wife. But not stopping there, he also devised a ceremony called the "Water and Land Liberation Ceremony" that appealed to beings in the upper realms of existence such as humans, bodhisattvas, and gods, to help beings in the lower realms of existence such as hungry ghosts, hell-dwellers, and animals—and even demons. This ceremony is still performed in Buddhist temples throughout China every year. Emperor Wu himself authored much of the liturgy used in these ceremonies, and eminent Buddhist monks of his day organized and carried them out with Emperor Wu's participation. According to legend, Emperor Wu's wife thereupon escaped from her rebirth as a snake, and Emperor Wu's devotion to Buddhism became even stronger in the years that followed.

Early in Emperor's Wu's rule (502-549 C.E.) he embraced vegetarianism, began to practice celibacy, and studied Buddhist scriptures in depth. In the year 519, at a ceremony in the Flowered Woods Garden at the rear of his palace complex, he formally took the vows of a Buddhist monk and gave up his position as emperor. Soon, however, the country's aristocracy paid a "ransom" to make him return to his position leading the country. In total, Emperor Wu formally became a "home-leaver" (as Buddhist renunciants are called) four times during his long reign, but returned to become emperor after a short period on each occasion.

Emperor Wu built or refurbished hundreds of Buddhist temples in his empire. Around his capital, now the city of Nanjing, he constructed temples that honored his late parents, plus a large number of other new temples and monasteries. One temple built to honor his father sat perched on the peak of nearby Bell Mountain, and required extensive resources for its construction and the maintenance of the large number of monks that resided there. Emperor Wu continued this building campaign for decades and consumed a large amount of the country's wealth for this purpose.

Through his devotion to the study and expounding of Buddhist scriptures and doctrine, Emperor Wu spent much time that might otherwise have been spent governing the country. Old records indicate he slept on a simple mat in a plain room inside his palace, where he spent long hours studying Buddhist texts and composing his own commentaries on their contents. He build ordination platforms where members of the aristocracy, along with the general public, together received the bodhisattva precepts in vast public assemblies. He devotedly studied the Prajnaparamita Sutra, and paid special attention to the Lotus and Nirvana sutras, among others.

Bearing in mind the great chasm in the Buddhist beliefs and practices between Bodhidharma and Emperor Wu, what follows is the standard account of their meeting in the *Compendium of Five Lamps*:

After sailing for three years, [Bodhidharma] arrived at Nanhai [Guangzhou]. The date was the twenty-first day of the ninth [lunar] month of [the year 527]. The governor of Guangzhou, [named] Xiao Angju received him ceremoniously and made his arrival known to Emperor Wu. When the emperor learned of this report, he dispatched an invitation [for Bodhidharma to come to the capital Nanjing]. [On the first day of the tenth lunar month of 528] Bodhidharma arrived in Nanjing.

The emperor spoke to him as follows: "Since I've assumed the throne I've built temples and written [about] scriptures, plus I've brought about the ordination of an incalculable number of monks. What merit does this [activity] have?"

Bodhidharma replied, "No merit whatever."

The emperor then asked, "Why does this have no merit?"

Bodhidharma said, "These are matters of small consequence in the affairs of men and gods that are caused by transgressions [literally, *outflows*]. It's like shadows chasing form, nothing real about it [literally, *although it's there it's not real*]."

The emperor then asked, "What is genuine merit?"

Bodhidharma said, "Pure wisdom of sublime perfection, experiencing one's [personal] solitary emptiness, seeking nothing in the world."

The emperor then asked, "What is the first principle for the holy truth?"

Bodhidharma said, "Across the vastness, nothing holy."

The emperor said, "Who is facing me?"

Bodhidharma said, "I don't know."

Bodhidharma's answer to Emperor Wu's questions clearly may be interpreted as saying that Zen values solitary meditation dedicated to observing the nature of the mind, as opposed to outward directed displays of religiosity. This is in line with the Buddha's legendary sermon on Vulture Peak that described the Zen dharma as "signless." Zen monks often famously rejected symbols otherwise embraced by Buddhism. Their iconoclastic acts often appeared to show disrespect toward things like statues of the Buddha, items that other Buddhists regarded as sacred symbols of the faith. But this interpretation, while valid, may only scratch the surface of why Bodhidharma and Emperor Wu were at loggerheads.

Bodhidharma's actions with regard to Emperor Wu may also be credited to an important paradox at the heart of Zen. One place the paradox may be found is in understanding the role of "bodhisattvas," exalted spiritual beings that are unique to Mahayana Buddhism. Emperor Wu was devoted to the study of sutras that honored bodhisattvas, as well as other doctrinal ideas spreading in Chinese Buddhism at that time. These ideas fell under the heading of the Chinese word *yi xue*, which means "doctrinal study." Emperor Wu actively engaged in discussion of such ideas, inviting many prominent Buddhist teachers to his court to expound and debate them. The role of bodhisattvas, a concept central to Mahayana Buddhism and expounded in popular texts like the *Lotus Sutra*, opened the door for lay people, including emperors, to have high-ranking spiritual positions by virtue of their vows and actions. The bodhisattva vows, especially as set forth in a text called the *Brahma Net Sutra*, were recited by both home-leaving monks and lay people. Also, teachings of the *Nirvana Sutra* spread the idea that all beings have "buddha nature" and could become buddhas. These developments blurred the distinction between traditional home-leaving monks and the rest of society.

Bodhidharma, as he is presented in later historical accounts like the one cited above, is clearly credited with rejecting the doctrinal approach to Buddhism taken by Emperor Wu and instead upholding the solitary practice of a home-leaving monk, a monk who meditates on the nature of the mind. The *Continued Biographies* offers various passages to support this difference in the religious practices of Emperor Wu and Bodhidharma. It indicates that Bodhidharma generally did not make use of scriptures in his teaching mission, the *Lankavatara Sutra*, a text emphasizing the nature of the mind, being the lone exception.

In this light, the meeting between Bodhidharma and Emperor Wu represents not only a disagreement in how Buddhism should be practiced, but a political difference as well. To Emperor Wu, Buddhism was not simply a matter of personal religious insight as personified through Zen practice, but a political ideology, a means by which to guide the state. The Buddhist doctrines that invested the emperor with both spiritual and temporal authority were to him a matter of great interest.

When Zen placed importance on the legendary meeting and failure of agreement between Bodhidharma and Emperor Wu, the tradition distanced itself from political and doctrinal issues that detracted from its central insight and practice, a practice that emphasized observing the nature of the mind.

While some early Zen masters, particularly the Fourth Ancestor Daoxin, introduced scriptural and doctrinal terminology into the Zen tradition, the writings of certain other early Zen masters indicate that these developments were not meant to show approval of doctrinal study, much less acceptance of a metaphysical interpretation of reality that flowed naturally from such teachings.

In the traditional story, after his encounter with Emperor Wu, Bodhidharma proceeded north, crossing the Yang-tse River "on a single blade of grass," a scene often depicted in Chinese paintings and sculpture. At Shaolin Monastery on Mt. Song, Bodhidharma is said to have spent nine years facing the wall of a cave in meditation. Late in life, it is possible that Bodhidharma lived near Luoyang City, which was then a showcase for the splendor of sixth-century Chinese

Buddhism. A widely accepted account appearing to confirm this possibility quotes the comments of a monk named Bodhidharma concerning the grandeur of Luoyang's great temples during the decade beginning in 520.

In legends, Bodhidharma's personality is solemn. The enlightened joy and ironic humor that vibrate in many Chinese Zen personalities and stories is not clearly evident in the early years of the sect. Indeed, the artistic paintings and sculptures of Bodhidharma created centuries later depict his legendary seriousness with a sour-looking face, sometimes glaring with what is misconstrued as ill-concealed rage. It is Bodhidharma's scowl, not the placid countenance of a bodhisattva, that announces the Zen of the ancestors. His painful look augurs the fearsome enlightenment gates of Linji's shout, Deshan's stick, and Yunmen's one-word barriers.

According to tradition, Bodhidharma gathered at least four prominent disciples. Huike, remembered as the Second Ancestor, received the "mind-to-mind" transmission that passed in turn to later Zen generations. The *Compendium of Five Lamps* provides the traditional story of this event.

After nine years, Bodhidharma wanted to return to India. Calling together his disciples he said, "The time for me to return to India is at hand. Can each of you say something to demonstrate your understanding?"

A disciple named Dao Fu said, "As I see it, it is not bound by words and phrases, nor is it separate from words and phrases. This is the function of Tao."

Bodhidharma said, "You have attained my skin."

The nun Zong Chi said, "According to my understanding, it is like a glorious glimpse of the realm of Akshobhya Buddha. Seen once, it need not be seen again."

Bodhidharma said, "You have attained my flesh."

A disciple named Dao Yu said, "The four elements are all empty and the five *skandhas* are without actual existence. As I see it, there is not a single dharma to be grasped."

Bodhidharma said, "You've attained my bones."

Thereupon Huike bowed and stood up straight.

Bodhidharma said, "You have attained my marrow."

The account of Bodhidharma's death that appears in the *Compendium of Five Lamps* says that he died at a place called "Thousand Saints Temple," a location about which there is no other evidence of its existence. This and many other aspects of Bodhidharma's death remain shrouded in the mists of time and legend.

After transmitting the mind-seal of succession to Huike, Bodhidharma is described by some stories as having either returned to India, or as having been poisoned by jealous rival teachers. One skillful account of his death incorporates both of these possibilities. His work in China complete, Bodhidharma is said to have made no attempt to resist a sixth attempt by his enemies to poison him. Sitting in an upright position, he passed away. The legend then relates that three years later a Dharma-seeker named Song Yun, who was returning from a trip to India, encountered Bodhidharma walking in the Himalayan Mountains carrying one sandal. When Song Yun asked the master where he was going, he replied, "To India." Song Yun returned to China and reported this event to the new emperor, Xiao Chung. Thereupon, Bodhidharma's grave was opened and his body was discovered missing, with only one sandal remaining in the crypt.

Although tradition holds that Bodhidharma brought Zen to China, other teachers taught Zen meditation in China during and prior to Bodhidharma's lifetime. Some contend that Chinese Zen practice prior to Bodhidharma consisted mainly of concentration practice. Therefore, Bodhidharma's Zen teaching differed from his predecessors because of his emphasis on "pointing directly at mind."

I have elsewhere pointed out that the unique importance of Bodhidharma's life and teaching may be as much political as spiritual. In any case, by the time of the fifth Chinese ancestor, Daman Hongren (601-74), Chinese society regarded Bodhidharma's Zen as a true and foremost stream of the Zen way.

Bodhidharma is traditionally said to have recommended the teachings of the *Lankavatara Sutra*. In the *Continued Biographies'* account of the life of his disciple Huike, Bodhidharma is quoted as having said, "As I observe the land of the Han [China], there is only this sutra [the *Lankavatara*]. Those of virtue who rely on it will on their own be ferried [to the other shore, over the world's troubles]. In writings most reliably attributed to Bodhidharma, however, no mention of the *Lankavatara Sutra* is found.

Legends about Bodhidharma flourished during the centuries following his life. The "lamp records," the historical biographies about the Zen ancients written mainly in the tenth to twelfth centuries, recorded many popular and pious fictions about him that remain in Chinese and East Asian folklore. However, stories linking Bodhidharma to the Chinese martial arts, or *gongfu*, have no historical basis. No evidence exists of any relationship between Bodhidharma and Chinese martial arts beyond their common connection to Shaolin Temple. A millenium separates the time of Bodhidharma's residence at that temple with the first mention of his supposed link to the martial arts. Thus, the story of this relationship must be seen as a relatively modern invention.

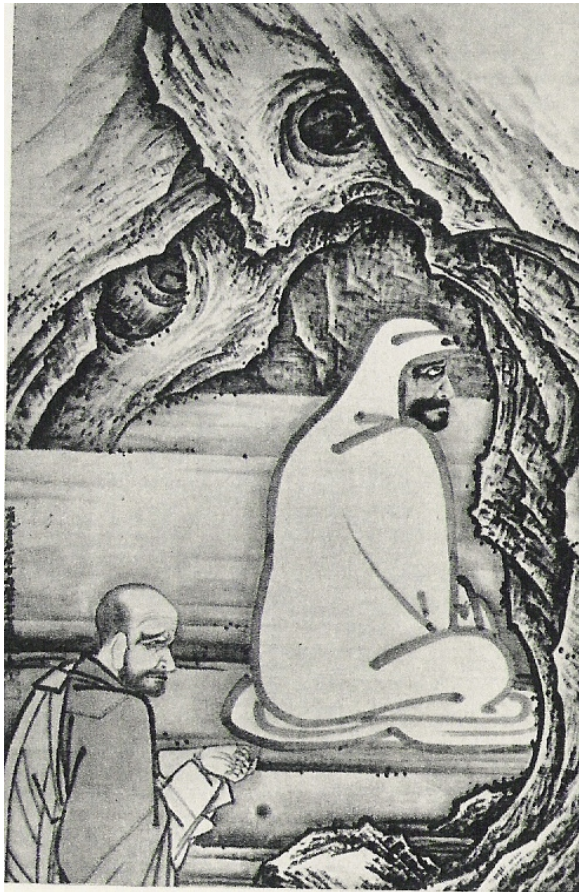
Today, carved figures of Bodhidharma are a common sight throughout East Asia, where his significance as a folk icon remains undiminished. Ironically, his original significance is submerged deeply in the sea of his folklore, and his relationship with Zen is often only remotely understood and appreciated.

Among the texts traditionally attributed to Bodhidharma, some scholars and Zen practitioners regard a text entitled the *Outline of Practice* as most likely taught by Bodhidharma himself.

While the exact place where Bodhidharma died is unknown, tradition (other than *Compendium of Five Lamps*, as mentioned above) designates as his burial place the Empty Form Temple, which sits on the slopes of Bear Ear Mountain in Henan Province. There, a temple rebuilt in recent years preserves a fourteenth-century stupa that marks the place of Bodhidharma's burial. Various stone artifacts unearthed at the location indicate that it has been honored as Bodhidharma's place since at least the seventh century. According to tradition, upon Bodhidharma's death Emperor Wu honored him with the posthumous name, "Zen Master Holy Descendant." Later, a Tang dynasty emperor honored Zen's first ancestor with the additional title, "Great Teacher Perfect Enlightenment."

Selection from:

Andy Ferguson, *Zen's Chinese Heritage: The Masters and Their Teachings* (Somerville, MA: Wisdom Publications, 2011).



Bodhidharma and Hui K'o. By Sesshū. (Japan, 1420-1506).

Outline of Practice

MANY roads lead to the Path (*Dao*), but basically there are only two: reason and practice. To enter by reason means to realize the essence through instruction and to believe that all living things share the same true nature, which isn't apparent because it's shrouded by sensation and delusion. Those who turn from delusion back to reality, who meditate on walls, the absence of self and other, the oneness of mortal and sage, and who remain unmoved even by scriptures are in complete and unspoken agreement with reason. Without moving, without effort, they enter, we say, by reason.

To enter by practice refers to four all-inclusive practices: suffering injustice, adapting to conditions, seeking nothing, and practicing the Dharma.

First, suffering injustice. When those who search for the Path encounter adversity, they should think to themselves, "In countless ages gone by, I've turned from the essential to the trivial and wandered through all manner of existence, often angry without cause and guilty of numberless transgressions. Now, though I do no wrong, I'm punished by my past. Neither gods nor men can foresee when an evil deed will bear its fruit. I accept it with an open heart and without complaint of injustice." The sutras say, "When you meet with adversity don't be upset, because it makes sense." With such understanding

you're in harmony with reason. And by suffering injustice you enter the Path.

Second, adapting to conditions. As mortals, we're ruled by conditions, not by ourselves. All the suffering and joy we experience depend on conditions. If we should be blessed by some great reward, such as fame or fortune, it's the fruit of a seed planted by us in the past. When conditions change, it ends. Why delight in its existence? But while success and failure depend on conditions, the mind neither waxes nor wanes. Those who remain unmoved by the wind of joy silently follow the Path.

Third, seeking nothing (*wu*). People of this world are deluded. They're always longing for something—always, in a word, seeking. But the wise wake up. They choose reason over custom. They fix their minds on the sublime and let their bodies change with the seasons. All phenomena are empty (*wu*). They contain nothing worth desiring. Calamity forever alternates with Prosperity. To dwell in the three realms' is to dwell in a burning house. To have a body is to suffer. Does anyone with a body know peace? Those who understand this detach themselves from all that exists and stop imagining or seeking anything. The sutras say, "To seek is to suffer. To seek nothing is bliss." When you seek nothing, you're on the Path.

Fourth, practicing the Dharma. The Dharma is the truth that all natures are pure. By this truth, all appearances are empty (*wu*). Defilement and attachment, subject and object don't exist. The sutras say, "The Dharma includes no being because it's free from the impurity of being, and the Dharma includes no self because it's free from the impurity of self." Those wise enough to believe and understand this truth are bound to practice according to the Dharma. And since that which is real includes nothing worth begrudging, they give their body, life, and property in charity, without regret, without the vanity of giver, gift, or recipient, and without bias or attachment. And to eliminate impurity they

teach others, but without becoming attached to form. Thus, through their own practice they're able to help others and glorify the Way (*Dao*) of Enlightenment. And as with charity, they also practice the other virtues. But while practicing the six virtues to eliminate delusion, they practice nothing at all. This is what's meant by practicing the Dharma.

* * *

Bloodstream Sermon

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.

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 Twelvfold 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. 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.

Even if you can explain thousands of sutras and shastras, unless you see your own nature yours is the teaching of a mortal, not a buddha. The true Way is sublime. It can't be expressed in language. Of what use are scriptures? But someone who sees his own nature finds the Way, even if he can't read a word. Someone who sees his nature is a buddha. And since a buddha's body is intrinsically pure and unsullied, and everything he says is an expression of his mind, being basically empty, a buddha can't be found in words or anywhere in the Twelvefold Canon.

The Way is basically perfect. It doesn't require perfecting. The Way has no form or sound. It's subtle and hard to perceive. It's like when you drink water: you know how hot or cold it is, but you can't tell others. Of that which only a tathagata knows men and gods remain unaware. The awareness of mortals falls short. As long as they're attached to appearances, they're unaware that "their minds are empty. And by mistakenly clinging to the appearance of things they lose the Way.

If you know that everything comes from the mind, don't become attached. Once attached, you're unaware. But once you see your own nature, the entire Canon becomes so much prose. Its thousands of sutras and shastras only amount to a clear mind. Understanding comes in midsentence. What good are doctrines?

The ultimate Truth is beyond words. Doctrines are words. They're not the Way. The Way is wordless. Words are illusions. They're no different from things that appear in your dreams at night, be they palaces or carriages, forested parks or lakeside pavilions. Don't conceive any delight for such things. They're all cradles of rebirth. Keep this in mind when you approach death. Don't cling to appearances, and you'll break through all barriers. A moment's hesitation and you'll be under the spell of devils. Your real body is pure and impervious. But because of delusions you're unaware of it. And because of this you suffer karma in vain. Wherever you find delight, you find bondage. But once you awaken to your original body and mind, you're no longer bound by attachments.

Anyone who gives up the transcendent for the mundane, in any of its myriad forms, is a mortal. A buddha is someone who finds freedom in good fortune and bad. Such is his power that karma can't hold him. No matter what kind of karma, a buddha transforms it. Heaven and hell are nothing to him. But the awareness of a mortal is dim compared to that of a buddha, who penetrates everything, inside and out.

If you're not sure, don't act. Once you act, you wander through birth and death and regret having no refuge. Poverty and hardship are created by false thinking. To understand this mind you have to act without acting. Only then will you see things from a tathagata's perspective.

But when you first embark on the Path, your awareness won't be focused. You're likely to see all sorts of strange, dreamlike scenes. But you shouldn't doubt that all such scenes come from your own mind and nowhere else.

If, as in a dream, you see a light brighter than the sun, your remaining attachments will suddenly come to an end and the nature of reality will be revealed. Such an occurrence serves as the basis for enlightenment. But this is something only you know. You can't explain it to others.

Or if, while you're walking, standing, sitting, or lying in a quiet grove, you see a light, regardless of whether it's bright or dim, don't tell others and don't focus on it. It's the light of your own nature.

Or if, while you're walking, standing, sitting, or lying in the stillness and darkness of night, everything appears as though in daylight, don't be startled. It's your own mind about to reveal itself.

Or if, while you're dreaming at night, you see the moon and stars in all their clarity, it means the workings of your mind are about to end. But don't tell others. And if your dreams aren't clear, as if you were walking in the dark, it's because your mind is masked by cares. This too is something only you know.

If you see your nature, you don't need to read sutras or invoke buddhas. Erudition and knowledge are not only useless but also cloud your awareness. Doctrines are only for pointing to the mind. Once you see your mind, why pay attention to doctrines?

To go from mortal to buddha, you have to put an end to karma, nurture your awareness, and accept what life brings. If you're always getting angry, you'll turn your nature against the Way. There's no advantage in deceiving yourself. Buddhas move freely through birth and death, appearing and disappearing at will. They can't be restrained by karma or overcome by devils.

Once mortals see their nature, all attachments end. Awareness isn't hidden. But you can only find it right now. It's only now. If you really want to find the Way, don't hold on to anything. Once you put an end to karma and nurture your awareness, any attachments that remain will come to an end. Understanding comes naturally. You don't have to make any effort. But fanatics don't understand what the Buddha meant. And the harder they try, the farther they get from the Sage's meaning. All day long they invoke buddhas and read sutras. But they remain blind to their own divine nature, and they don't escape the Wheel.

A buddha is an idle person. He doesn't run around after fortune and fame. What good are such things in the end? People who don't see their nature and think reading sutras, invoking buddhas, studying long and hard, practicing morning and night, never lying down, or acquiring knowledge is the Dharma, blaspheme the Dharma. Buddhas of the past and future only talk about seeing your nature. All practices are impermanent. Unless they see their nature, people who claim to have attained unexcelled, complete enlightenment (anuttara-samyak-sambodhi) are liars.

Among Shakyamuni's ten greatest disciples, Ananda was foremost in learning. But he didn't know the Buddha. All he did was study and memorize. Arhats don't know the Buddha. All they know are so many practices for realization, and they become trapped by cause and effect. Such is a mortal's karma: no escape from birth and death. By doing the opposite of what he intended, such people blaspheme the Buddha. Killing them would not be wrong. The sutras say, "Since icchantikas are incapable of belief, killing them would be blameless, whereas people who believe reach the state of buddhahood."

Unless you see your nature, you shouldn't go around criticizing the goodness of others. There's no advantage in deceiving yourself. Good and bad are distinct. Cause and effect are dear. Heaven and hell are right before your eyes. But fools don't believe and fall straight into a hell of endless darkness without even knowing it. What keeps them from believing is the heaviness of their karma. They're like blind people who don't believe there's such a thing as light. Even if you explain it to them, they still don't believe, because they're blind. How can they possibly distinguish light?

The same holds true for fools who end up among the lower orders of existence or among the poor and despised. They can't live and they can't die. And despite their sufferings, if you ask them, they say they're as happy as gods. All mortals, even those who think themselves wellborn, are likewise unaware. Because of the heaviness of their karma, such fools can't believe and can't get free.

People who see that their mind is the buddha don't need to shave their head. Laymen are buddhas too. Unless they see their nature, people who shave their head are simply fanatics.

But since married laymen don't give up sex, how can they become buddhas?

I only talk about seeing your nature. I don't talk about sex simply because you don't see your nature. Once you see your nature, sex is basically immaterial. It ends along with your delight in it. Even if some habits remain, they can't harm you, because your nature is essentially pure. Despite dwelling in a material body of four elements, your nature is

basically pure. It can't be corrupted. Your real body is basically pure. It can't be corrupted. Your real body has no sensation, no hunger or thirst, no warmth or cold, no sickness, no love or attachment, no pleasure or pain, no good or bad, no shortness or length, no weakness or strength. Actually, there's nothing here. It's only because you cling to this material body that things like hunger and thirst, warmth and cold, and sickness appear.

Once you stop clinging and let things be, you'll be free, even of birth and death. You'll transform everything. You'll possess spiritual powers that can't be obstructed. And you'll be at peace wherever you are. If you doubt this, you'll never see through anything. You're better off doing nothing. Once you act, you can't avoid the cycle of birth and death. But once you see your nature, you're a buddha even if you work as a butcher.

But butchers create karma by slaughtering animals. How can they be buddhas?

I only talk about seeing your nature. I don't talk about creating karma. Regardless of what we do, our karma has no hold on us. Through endless kalpas without beginning, it's only because people don't see their nature that they end up in hell. As long as a person creates karma, he keeps passing through birth and death. But once a person realizes his original nature, he stops creating karma. If he doesn't see his nature, invoking buddhas won't release him from his karma, regardless of whether or not he's a butcher. But once he sees his nature, all doubts vanish. Even a butcher's karma has no effect on such a person.

In India, the twenty-seven patriarchs only transmitted the imprint of the mind. And the only reason I've come to China is to transmit the instantaneous teaching of the Mahayana: *This mind is the buddha*. I don't talk about precepts, devotions or ascetic practices such as immersing yourself in water and fire, treading a wheel of knives, eating one meal a day, or never lying down. These are fanatical, provisional teachings. Once you recognize your moving, miraculously aware nature, yours is the mind of all buddhas. Buddhas of the past and future only talk about transmitting the mind. They teach nothing else. If someone understands this teaching, even if he's illiterate he's a buddha. If you don't see your own miraculously aware nature, you'll never find a buddha even if you break your body into atoms.

The buddha is your real body, your original mind. This mind has no form or characteristics, no cause or effect, no tendons or bones. It's like space. You can't hold it. It's not the mind of materialists or nihilists. Except for a tathagata, no one else—no mortal, no deluded being—can fathom it.

But this mind isn't somewhere outside the material body of four elements. Without this mind we can't move. The body has no awareness. Like a plant or stone, the body has no nature. So how does it move? It's the mind that moves.

Language and behavior, perception and conception are all functions of the moving mind. All motion is the mind's motion. Motion is its function. Apart from motion there's no mind, and

apart from the mind there's no motion. But motion isn't the mind. And the mind isn't motion. Motion is basically mindless. And the mind is basically motionless. But motion doesn't exist without the mind. And the mind doesn't exist without motion. There's no mind for motion to exist apart from, and no motion for mind to exist apart from. Motion is the mind's function, and its function is its motion. Even so, the mind neither moves nor functions, because the essence of its functioning is emptiness and emptiness is essentially motionless. Motion is the same as the mind. And the mind is essentially motionless.

Hence the sutras tell us to move without moving, to travel without traveling, to see without seeing, to laugh without laughing, to hear without hearing, to know without knowing, to be happy without being happy, to walk without walking, to stand without standing. And the sutras say, "Go beyond language. Go beyond thought." Basically, seeing, hearing, and knowing are completely empty. Your anger, joy, or pain is like that of a puppet. You can search, but you won't find a thing.

According to the sutras, evil deeds result in hardships and good deeds result in blessings. Angry people go to hell and happy people go to heaven. But once you know that the nature of anger and joy is empty and you let them go, you free yourself from karma. If you don't see your nature, quoting sutras is no help. I could go on, but this brief sermon will have to do.