
A Glimpse of Chan through the Six Patriarch's Platform Sutra

Dear Dharma Friends,

The topic we are going to discuss today is “A Glimpse of Chan through the Sixth Patriarch’s Platform Sutra.” With the blessings of the Buddha and the culmination of the right causes and conditions, I am very honored to be here today to discuss the Dharma with you. I am touched that each one of you took time from your busy schedules to attend the Dharma talk. I want to thank you and pray that you will be blessed with wisdom and prosperity.

I. The Sixth Patriarch and The Sixth Patriarch's Platform Sutra

A. The Person: The Sixth Patriarch was not an illiterate

Most Buddhists have heard of the *Sixth Patriarch's Platform¹ Sutra*. We also know that the *Sixth Patriarch's Platform Sutra* (abbreviated as Platform Sutra hereafter) is not only an important sutra of the Chan School, but also for other Buddhist sects as well. Its influence extends beyond Buddhism and is regarded as a fine work of Chinese literature.

The Platform Sutra is a collection of Dharma talks given by the Sixth Patriarch of the Chan School of Buddhism. The Sixth Patriarch was the Venerable Huineng, whose life story is both fascinating and legendary. Many of you may have read that the Sixth Patriarch was a woodcutter and an illiterate. Because of his store of merits from previous lives and his quick grasp of the Dharma, he realized enlightenment under the guidance of the Fifth Patriarch and became a great master whose influence can still be felt to this day.

¹ The word *platform* here refers to the raised platform on which the Sixth Patriarch gave his Dharma talks.

I would, however, like to take this opportunity to dispel the notion that the Sixth Patriarch was an illiterate. On the contrary, he was an extremely well read man and had profound insights into many Buddhist sutras. He was very knowledgeable about numerous sutras, such as the *Diamond Sutra*, the *Vimalakirti Sutra*, the *Lankavatara Sutra*, the *Surangama Sutra*, the *Nirvana Sutra*, the *Lotus Sutra*, and the *Amitabha Sutra*.

The *Platform Sutra* reveals quite a bit about the life of the Sixth Patriarch. According to the Platform Sutra, the Sixth Patriarch became enlightened when he heard someone recite the *Diamond Sutra* while he was selling firewood. From the sutra, we also know that the Sixth Patriarch had a sworn brother named Liu Zhilue. Liu was a Buddhist and had an aunt who was a bhiksuni with the Dharma name Wujinzang. She often recited the *Nirvana Sutra*. One day, she asked the Sixth Patriarch to explain to her the meaning of the sutra, and it was, indeed, the supposedly illiterate Sixth Patriarch who interpreted the sutra for her. From the *Platform Sutra*, we know that the Sixth Patriarch was a learned man. He once traveled to the Xishan Cave in the Lechang District to study with

Chan Master Zhiyuan. He also stayed with Chan Master Huiji and listened to his Dharma talks on the *Toutuo Sutra*.

It is true that in the *Platform Sutra*, Huineng called himself an illiterate. This was just a figure of speech and reflected how humble a person Huineng was. Even today, we hear some people refer to themselves humbly, saying things like, “I am not so good at this, or I can’t do that well.” This shows that the person is humble; it does not mean that the person is truly ignorant. If we look at the breadth of the Sixth Patriarch’s knowledge and the skillful means he used to expound the Dharma, it is clear that he was not illiterate. Therefore, we can say with certainty that the Sixth Patriarch was not an illiterate.

B. The Time: The Sixth Patriarch lived during a period when Chinese Buddhism flourished

Huineng was born at a time when Buddhism was flourishing in China. It was during this time that the Venerable Xuanzang had just returned from India. He settled in the capital city of Changan, where he translated the sutras he had brought back from India

and established the Faxiang School.² Concurrently, Vinaya Master, Daoxuan, the founder of the Vinaya School,³ was at Zhongnan Shan teaching the *Four Part Vinaya*. The Venerable Shandao, called the Monk of Brightness, was also in Changan, where he spread the Dharma of the Pure Land School and taught the Dharma method of being mindful of Amitabha Buddha. Additionally, during this time the imperial teacher, Fazang Xianshou, wrote Commentaries on Avatamsaka Sutra and spread its teachings. This was a period when many great masters lived and numerous schools were founded. This was, indeed, the golden age of Chinese Buddhism.

Soon after Huineng realized enlightenment, the Fifth Patriarch passed the lineage to Huineng. As the Sixth Patriarch of the Chan School, Huineng is known for founding the method of instantaneous realization (versus gradual realization) to achieve enlightenment, a method that does not rely on spoken or written language. During this time, many promi-

² This school was also known as Mind-Only School, and founded by Xuanzang upon his return from India and his subsequent translation of the Yogacara works. This school emphasizes the understanding of the underlying principle or nature of all things.

³ The school which emphasizes discipline.

nent Chan masters emerged and the Chan School prospered. In this rich and accepting atmosphere, many other schools of Buddhism were also founded. These different schools existed side by side, each of them lending impetus to the others, thus stimulating discussions and drawing people to the religion. When Huineng founded the method of instantaneous realization, he attracted many learned Buddhists to come and study with him. Under his tutelage and with the influence of other schools, the Chan School of Buddhism flourished and stood out above the rest, leaving an indelible mark in the history of Chinese Buddhism.

C. A Key Revelation: Contemplation is not just about sitting meditation

When we talk about Chan, most people automatically think of sitting meditation. Most people think that if we are to contemplate the truth, we have to do sitting meditation, just like an old monk in dhyana (deep meditative concentration). But when we take a look at the Sixth Patriarch's teachings, we will see that this is not the case at all.

Once, a government minister by the name of Xue Jian came to the Sixth Patriarch and asked, "In the

capital city, there are many people practicing contemplation. They told us that in order to contemplate and realize the truth, we must sit and meditate. What is your opinion on this matter?”

The Sixth Patriarch replied, “The truth can only be realized in our minds. What does it have to do with sitting?” This is a very important revelation. We need to understand that Chan cannot be realized by adjusting our physical posture, either by sitting or lying down. How do you realize Chan? We can realize Chan during daily activities, such as walking, standing, sitting, or lying down. Even gesturing our hands, moving our eyebrows, or blinking our eyes can help us realize instantaneous enlightenment and see our own nature.

Grinding a piece of brick will not make a mirror; sitting in meditation will not make a person a Buddha. The important thing about contemplation is to see our true nature. If we can comprehend this point, we can experience the world of Chan.

II. An Introduction to Chan

A. Chan and daily life

Now that I have briefly introduced the Sixth Pa-

triarch, I would like to turn our discussion to Chan. What, then, is Chan?

The teachings of the Chan School of Buddhism do not rely on language and words. Words cannot describe Chan. In the past, if anyone recited the name of the Buddha in a meditation hall, he or she would be asked to rinse out his or her mouth for three days. If anyone spoke, with or without reason, he or she would be given thirty lashes. This may sound very unreasonable, but if we understand the approach of Chan, we might think otherwise. Chan points directly to the mind. When we understand the mind, we will see our Buddha Nature and thus become enlightened. The teachings of Chan are passed from mind to mind, for Chan is beyond words. If we try to explain Chan, we may, at best, give a semblance of Chan.

Chan is something that cannot be spoken, yet it is something that cannot be left unspoken. Thus, the Chan School emphasizes the importance of passing on the light of truth from a teacher to a student. Like the passing of a baton in a relay race, the Chan teacher may actually give the student who has understood the true meaning of Chan a certain object to symbolize that the light of truth is now passed to the

next generation. On other occasions, words are used to denote the passing of the light of truth.

While analysis and examination are critical skills in acquiring worldly knowledge, a few words are all that a Chan master needs to reveal the puzzles of the universe. Through the practice of non-discrimination, Chan helps us realize transcendence. Anyone who is interested in studying Chan not only has to be clever and bright, but more importantly, has to have a sense of humor. In the Chan annals, we can read about conversations and exchanges between Chan masters and see for ourselves the humor and subtleties of the Chan teachings.

What I am going to discuss today is not so much about the teachings of the Chan School or the practice of contemplation and instantaneous realization. Instead, what I really want to share is the joy and freedom that is available to us all if we just integrate a bit of the Chan outlook into everyday life.

Qingyuan Xingsi, one of the leading disciples of the Sixth Patriarch, once said, “Before I started the practice of contemplation, I looked at mountains and I saw mountains; I looked at rivers and I saw rivers. When I started the practice of contemplation, I looked

at mountains and did not see mountains; I looked at rivers and did not see rivers. Since I became enlightened through the practice of contemplation, I look at mountains and I still see mountains; I look at rivers and I still see rivers.”

What he means is this: Before he started the practice of contemplation, he looked at the external world, and like each one of us would, saw mountains as mountains and rivers as rivers. After he started the practice of contemplation, he viewed the world with transcendence; he did not look at mountains as mountains or rivers as rivers. After enlightenment, his internal world was harmonized with the external world, and he looked at the world in both a transcendental and worldly way. In this state of harmony, he looked at mountains still as mountains and rivers still as rivers. Though mountains and rivers were still mountains and rivers to him, he now looked at them with a different state of mind.

I am not asking all of you to meditate like old monks or to become enlightened like the Sixth Patriarch. It is unimportant whether or not we have the opportunity to practice in this manner. But if we can approach our lives with a bit of transcendence and

seize every opportune moment to practice Chan, then our state of mind will be wonderfully different. This is really not as difficult as it may sound. Take the example of drinking tea. While some of us may find a certain herbal tea pleasant and fragrant, others may find the taste bitter and strong. In the area of food, while some people like hot spicy food, others may find the same food unpalatable. Because of our different preferences, the same food or drink may taste different to each of us. In the same manner, how we handle different situations often depends on our mindset. If we can integrate a bit of the Chan teachings into our daily lives, our state of mind will become elevated and we will look at life differently. In the next section, I'd like to share with you the unique teaching method of the Sixth Patriarch. If we can catch a glimpse of what Chan is, our lives will be greatly enriched.

B. Where did you come from?

The *Platform Sutra* has a very interesting and entertaining description of the first meeting between the Fifth Patriarch and Huineng. When the Fifth Patriarch first saw Huineng, he asked him, "Where did you come from?"

“I came from Lingnan,” answered Huineng.

The Fifth Patriarch then commented, “Lingnan is a place for barbarians and the uncivilized. They do not have the Buddha Nature.”

To which, Huineng replied, “People can be classified as northerners or southerners, but there is no such difference in the Buddha Nature.”

When the Fifth Patriarch heard Huineng’s reply, he thought highly of the Sixth Patriarch and eventually passed the lineage (symbolized by his robe and bowl) to Huineng, who then became the Sixth Patriarch. Later, when the Sixth Patriarch taught the Dharma, he also asked the same question of his many disciples. I have chosen four such examples here.

Venerable Shenhui came to visit with the Sixth Patriarch. The Sixth Patriarch asked him, “Where did you come from?”

Shenhui answered, “I did not come from anywhere.” The Sixth Patriarch was very pleased with this answer.

When Chan Master Nanyue Huairang met with the Sixth Patriarch, the Sixth Patriarch asked him in the same manner, “Where did you come from?”

Huairang replied, “I came from Venerable An’s

place.”

The Sixth Patriarch then asked, “What brought you here?” Huairang could not answer this question. He stayed at Caoxi⁴ for ten years and did not reach enlightenment until he was thirty years old.

When Chan Master Qingyuan Xingsi first came to Caoxi, the Sixth Patriarch asked him the following, “What did you do before you came here?”

Xingsi answered, “I did not even practice the Noble Truths.” He meant that he was not attached to becoming a Buddha or a patriarch, so the Sixth Patriarch was very impressed with him.

When Nanyang Huizhong, an Imperial Master of the Tang Dynasty, first arrived at the temple of the Sixth Patriarch, the Sixth Patriarch asked him the same question. Huizong replied, “I came from nearby.” The Sixth Patriarch was also delighted with his answer.

In Chan practice, a questioning attitude is very important, and conversations between Chan masters are usually in the form of questions. When the Fifth Patriarch asked Huineng where he came from, he

⁴ The temple where the Sixth Patriarch lived and taught for many years.

opened up the causal conditions for Huineng to become his chosen disciple and the Sixth Patriarch. In his later years, the Sixth Patriarch used the same question as a lightning rod for his students to help them see their true nature.

III. Teaching Methods of the Chan School

A. The method of reflection

The Chan method of reflection is to answer, or reflect, a question with another question. This method can lead to quick understanding. The best way to understand how this method works is through exemplification. Once, a group of people saw a Chan master spit on a Buddha statue. They were repulsed and reprimanded the Chan master, “What is the matter with you? How can you spit on the statue of the Buddha?”

The Chan master, who was not a bit offended, replied calmly, “Please show me a spot where the Buddha is not present? I need to spit again.”

This Chan master had already realized the fact that “the Dharma nature permeates all space; the Dharma-body fills the whole universe.” Those who reprimanded the Chan master thought that they had

more respect for the Buddha, when in fact their behavior showed that they did not truly understand the Buddha. The Dharma-body (i.e. the body of the Buddha's teachings) is present everywhere, which explains why the Chan master asked, "Please show me a spot where the Buddha is not present?" If you are asked this question, can you answer it? If you cannot answer, it means that you do not yet understand the Dharma. Even to those who understand the Dharma, such a reflection can help their wisdom grow and deepen their understanding of Chan.

Mazu Daoyi studied under a student of the Sixth Patriarch. Now, Daoyi had a student named Baizhang Huaihai. One day, a monk asked Chan Master Baizhang, "Please, what is a Buddha?"

Baizhang turned the question around and asked him, "Hah! Who are you?" The meaning of his reply is this: You are a Buddha. Don't you know that? Why do you need to ask someone else? One person asked, "What is a Buddha?" The other replied, "Who are you?" It may look very simple, but its subtle meaning is boundless.

The Fourth Patriarch, Daoxin, once asked the Third Patriarch, Sengcan, "What is the Dharma

method for liberation?”

“Who binds you?” asked Sengcan.

“Nobody binds me,” answered Daoxin.

“If nobody binds you, why do you want to be liberated?”

From this layering of questions, we see that we are not so much bound by external forces as we are bound by ourselves. There is a common Chinese saying which carries a similar meaning; it goes like this: “The world itself does not present any suffering; the ignorant bring suffering upon themselves.” If we examine what causes us to ache in everyday life, we will see that the mind is often the cause of our headaches and problems. The mind is like a factory. A good factory manufactures quality products, while a substandard factory produces defective products. Likewise, healthy minds produce good thoughts, and deluded minds create trouble and affliction.

The usual mode of learning is to study hard and ask plenty of questions. In Chan, questions are often answered with more questions. This is the method of reflection. Chan practitioners may direct the questions to themselves. Questions may include: Who is reciting the name of the Buddha? What is the meaning of

the First Patriarch coming west? Before I was born, who was I? If you persist in asking yourself questions like these to the “bitter” end and concentrate your thinking on such questions, you will become enlightened one day.

The practice of contemplation is something that is totally dependent upon us. In the *Platform Sutra*, there is an exchange between the Fifth Patriarch and the Sixth Patriarch that illustrates the importance of self-reliance. After the Sixth Patriarch was awakened to the truth, the Fifth Patriarch passed the teachings of the Dharma to him and asked him to go south to avoid persecution by those who were jealous of him because he was chosen as the Sixth Patriarch. The Fifth Patriarch said to him, “I will ferry you across the river.”

The Sixth Patriarch replied, “That will not be necessary; I can do it myself.”

The Fifth Patriarch again offered, “Now that you are leaving, let me send you off. I want to row you across to the other shore.”

The Sixth Patriarch turned him down and said, “When I was deluded, I needed a teacher to ferry me. Now that I have realized the truth, I can ferry myself

across to the other shore.”

From this exchange, we can see that while our teachers are there to guide our practice, only we can realize the truth for ourselves. When we practice contemplation, we should emulate the spirit of Avalokitesvara Bodhisattva and vigilantly watch over our own minds. This is the essence of Chan and the genesis of its profound teachings. Once, a young man was paying respect to Avalokitesvara Bodhisattva in a temple. He could not help but notice that in the Avalokitesvara Bodhisattva statue’s hand was a string of prayer beads. He asked a monk of the temple, “We use prayer beads to help us recite the name of Avalokitesvara Bodhisattva. Now, whose name does Avalokitesvara Bodhisattva recite?”

The monk replied, “Avalokitesvara Bodhisattva!”

The young man was puzzled and asked, “Why does Avalokitesvara Bodhisattva need to recite the name of Avalokitesvara Bodhisattva?”

The monk smiled and replied, “It is more reliable to depend on oneself than to depend on others.”

Buddhism is a religion that puts great emphasis on personal development, self-realization, and self-discovery of our own pure nature. Hence, it is

very important that we practice and realize the truth for ourselves. This teaching method of reflection, of answering a question with more questions, can help us open and develop our own thinking. One day, in a flash of insight, we will be able to see the truth.

B. The method of variation

In the Chan School, it is quite common for a Chan master to vary the answer to the same question depending on who is asking it and the person's level of spiritual maturity. A Chan master may answer a question by affirmation, while at other times, he or she may answer the same question by negation. Again, the best way to understand how this teaching method works is to review some examples.

As we said earlier, Chan Master Mazu Daoyi was a student of a student of the Sixth Patriarch. Whenever anyone asked him what is the Dharma, he would inevitably answer, "What the mind is, what the Buddha is."⁵

This continued for some time and finally someone asked him, "Why do you always tell people

⁵ What it means is this: [The Dharma is] what the mind is, what the Buddha is. To see the mind is to see the Dharma, and when we see the mind, we are enlightened Buddhas.

‘What the mind is, what the Buddha is,’ whenever you are asked about the Dharma?”

Mazu answered, “Let me tell you. When a child cries, you have to give the child a cookie to quiet the child down.”

The person asked further, “What would you do differently if the child is not crying?”

Mazu replied, “I would say, ‘No mind, no Buddha.’”⁶

At that time, a young Chan master by the name of Damei Fachang came to learn the Dharma from Mazu. The young man asked Mazu, “Please tell me what is the Dharma?”

Mazu also told the young man, “What the mind is, what the Buddha is.” Upon hearing this, Damei immediately became enlightened.

After attaining realization, Damei took leave and traveled to other places to teach Chan Buddhism; many people became his students. Word that Damei had become enlightened finally reached Mazu, his teacher. Mazu wondered if Damei had truly understood the Dharma, so he asked one of his students to

⁶ In here, Mazu talks about emptiness and that even the mind or a Buddha is ultimately emptiness. We should not be attached to the mind nor the notion of becoming a Buddha.

go and test Damei. When the student met up with Damei, he asked, “Dharma brother, what did you learn from our teacher?”

Damei did not hesitate and answered, “What the mind is, what the Buddha is.”

As instructed by Mazu, the student told Damei, “Oh! Do you know that our teacher is no longer teaching ‘What the mind is, what the Buddha is’?”

Damei asked, “What is he teaching now?”

The student said, “Our teacher is now teaching us ‘No mind, no Buddha.’”

After hearing this, Damei frowned and told the student, “This old monk likes to give people a hard time. I don’t really care if he is teaching ‘No mind, no Buddha.’ I will continue teaching, ‘What the mind is, what the Buddha is.’”

The student then went back to Mazu and told him exactly what had transpired. After his recount, Mazu was very happy and said, “The plum⁷ is truly ripe now.” What he meant was that Damei truly understood the Dharma.

Sometimes we need affirmation to strengthen our beliefs and gain confidence. Other times, our beliefs

⁷ The word ‘mei’ in Damei can also mean the plum fruit.

and understanding need to be tested and challenged before we can truly understand. In this example, the Chan master Damei was very self-confident and refused to follow others blindly. Regardless of whether Mazu was teaching “No mind, no Buddha,” he was not swayed. This kind of self-confidence, self-determination, and self-respect is very characteristic of a true Chan master.

A lay devotee once went to Chan Master Zhizang and asked, “Chan Master, please tell me if there are heavens and hells?”

“Yes.”

“Does the Triple Gem—the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha—exist?”

“Yes.”

“Is it true that there is the Law of Cause and Effect and the six realms of existence?”

“Yes, it’s true.”

Regardless of what the lay devotee asked of Chan Master Zhizang, he would answer in the affirmative. The lay devotee grew skeptical and finally said, “Chan Master, you are wrong.”

Chan Master Zhizang asked, “Why not?”

The lay devotee replied, “When I went to Chan

Master Jingshan and asked him the same questions, he always answered, 'No, it does not exist.' When I asked him if there is such a thing as the Law of Cause and Effect, he said, 'No.' When I asked him if there are Buddhas and bodhisattvas, he said, 'No.' When I asked him if there are heavens and hells, he also said, 'No.' Why is it that you tell me 'Yes' to all my questions?"

Chan master Zhizang was not at all surprised. He asked the lay devotee, "Let me ask you, do you have a wife?"

The lay devotee was not sure where he was going with this, but he answered anyway, "Yes."

"Do you have children?"

"Yes."

Zhizang continued to ask, "Does Chan Master Jingshan have a wife?"

"No."

"Does Chan Master Jingshan have children?"

"No."

Chan master Zhizang explained, "This is why Chan Master Jingshan told you that the Law of Cause and Effect, heavens and hells, and so on and so forth all do not exist. I told you that they exist because you

have a wife and children.”

With the same set of questions, these two Chan masters gave the lay devotee very different answers. While the two sets of answers look very different on the surface, they are actually very close in meaning. Although one said that they do exist and the other said that they do not exist, the two Chan masters are not contradicting each other. There is only one Dharma, but we may think otherwise because we have different degrees of understanding. The “no” of Jingshan has a very deep meaning and represents an elevated state of mind. The “no” of Jingshan is emptiness, and without emptiness, there would not be any existence.

C. The method of allusion

How does the method of allusion work? When Chan masters converse and preach, they often do not answer questions directly; instead, they use metaphors or apparently unrelated subjects to make indirect references. This method works because it makes one realize the truth on his or her own. The following are a few illustrations of how this method works.

Chan Master Zhaozhou Congren humorous person. He was also called the “Old Buddha of

Zhaozhou.” Even when he was eighty, he continued to travel and learn. Once while in a playful mood, he made a bet with his student, Chan Master Wenyuan. He told his student, “Let us bet one another. We will see which one of us can debase himself the most. Whoever wins can have this biscuit here.”

Wenyuan nodded and said, “All right, you can start first.”

Zhaozhou started off by saying, “I am a donkey.”

Wenyuan immediately replied, “I am the rear end of the donkey.”

Zhaozhou followed up and said, “I am the excrement of the donkey.”

Wenyuan was not about to give up; he said, “I am the maggot in the excrement.”

Zhaozhou was stumped, so he asked Wenyuan, “What are you doing in the excrement?”

“I am cooling myself off from the summer heat!”

Zhaozhou admitted defeat and gladly handed the biscuit over to Wenyuan. What this exchange teaches us is this: Like a phoenix that rises out of ashes, bodhi is realized in the midst of suffering. When our minds are pure, we see everything as pure. Our mindset can change the way we look at things; even a donkey, its

buttocks, it stools, and a maggot can help us see the Dharma. In this example, we see that the conversations between Chan masters are full of Chan teachings and rich in meaning.

In the Jingqu Temple of Wenzhou, there was a bhiksuni by the name of Xuanji. She was a well-learned bhiksuni and had once traveled to Dari Shan (which means ‘hills of the great sun’) to practice contemplation. Later, she went to visit with Chan Master Xuefeng (which means ‘snow peaks’). Like the Sixth Patriarch, Xuefeng also liked to ask his visitors this question: “Where did you come from?”

“I came from Dari Shan,” replied Xuanji.

Xuefeng then asked her mockingly, “Has the sun risen yet?”

Xuanji was not intimidated and answered, “If the sun had risen, the snow peak (Xuefeng) would have melted.” To understand why she answered this way, we have to know the meaning of Xuefeng’s question. When he asked her if the sun had risen, he was asking her indirectly if she had realized the truth. Xuanji then told him that if she had realized the truth, she would not have traveled all this way to learn from him, Xuefeng.

From the way that Xuanji answered his questions, he felt that though she had not realized the truth, she was an earnest student. So, he asked her, “What is your name?”

“My name is Xuanji (which means ‘a wonderful weaving machine’).”

Xuefeng wanted to find out how much she practiced everyday, so he tested her, “How much do you weave everyday?”

Xuanji replied, “I don’t have a thread on me.” She implied that she was completely liberated, which of course was stretching the truth a bit.

After they finished talking, Xuanji stood up and left. As she was walking to the door, Xuefeng called to her from behind, “Hey, your robe is dragging on the ground!” When Xuanji heard this, she hurriedly turned around and looked. Xuefeng broke out in laughter and said, “And you said you don’t have a single thread on you.” Whether we have realized the truth or not is something that cannot be faked. Using this method of allusion, Chan masters can assess if one is truly enlightened and liberated.

Once, a monk asked Zhaozhou this question: “May I ask what is the right way to contemplate and

realize the truth?”

Zhaozhou got up from his seat and said, “I have to go to the restroom.” He took a few steps, turned back and said to the monk, “You see, even a simple thing like this, I have to do on my own. No one can do it for me.” With this, he was indirectly telling the monk that contemplation and realization are very personal matters that we should work out on our own. The method of allusion is indirect, yet crystal clear.

During the Tang Dynasty, there was a great scholar by the name of Han Yu. He had a prejudice against Buddhism and tried to dissuade the emperor from giving a grand reception for the Buddha’s relic. The emperor was not amused and demoted Han Yu to governor of the backwater province of Chaozhou. As this area was far removed from the capital and culturally backward, there were few learned scholars with whom Han Yu could exchange ideas. Among the handful of learned scholars who lived there was Chan Master Dadian, and Han Yu decided to pay the Master a visit. It just so happened that each time Han Yu went to call on Dadian, he was not in. One day, Han Yu called on the Master again and was delighted to find him sitting in meditation. He was not about to give up

this opportunity, so he decided to wait. After waiting a long time, the Master was still in meditation and Han Yu was growing impatient. Seeing that Han Yu had waited for such a long time, Dadian's attendant tapped a little bell by his master's ear, and he said out loud, "First, influence through meditative concentration, then eradicate [arrogance] with wisdom." What he means is this: Master, your meditative concentration has already moved Han Yu; he is no longer arrogant and condescending. Now, please come out of meditation and teach him with your wisdom.

Han Yu was a very smart fellow and immediately understood the meaning behind the attendant's words. He smiled and said, "The Chan Master's teaching method is truly superb. Your attendant's words have already led me to the door of Buddhism." Later, Han Yu asked the Master to be his teacher and took refuge in the Triple Gem.

Sometimes, spoken words may not be the best way to reach others. Like Chan Master Dadian, he was able to move Han Yu without uttering a single word. Even the attendant hardly said anything, yet they were able to indirectly allude to a very deep and profound teaching. The once arrogant Han Yu was so

moved that he changed his ways and took refuge in the Triple Gem.

Dadian was a student of Chan Master Shitou Xiqian, whose body is still kept at a temple in Japan to this day. Shitou's life was very interesting. The way that he became enlightened is another illustrative example of the method of allusion. When Shitou was twelve, he had a chance meeting with the Sixth Patriarch at the temple of Caoxi. The Sixth Patriarch took a liking to him immediately and told him, "I will take you in as my student." Shitou was very honored and became a student of the Sixth Patriarch at the tender age of twelve.

Unfortunately, the Sixth Patriarch lived for only another three years, and Shitou was just fifteen. Before the Sixth Patriarch passed away, Shitou asked the Sixth Patriarch what he should do upon his passing. The Sixth Patriarch told him, "Go to Xingsi." In Chinese, the name Xingsi is homophonic with the words "Xuansi," which means to contemplate. Thus, it was no surprise that Shitou misunderstood the dying words of the Sixth Patriarch, and he meditated everyday. Fortunately, an elder monk figured out what was happening and he told Shitou, "You are

wrong. Your teacher told you to go to your Dharma brother Xingsi. He is now teaching the Dharma in the hills of Qingyuan; you should go there to pay him a visit.” Now that Shitou finally understood what the Sixth Patriarch wanted him to do, he immediately left for Qingyuan. When he arrived there, Chan Master Xingsi asked him, “Where did you come from?”

“I came from Caoxi,” answered Shitou, essentially telling Xingsi that he came from the Sixth Patriarch.

Xingsi asked further, “Did you attain anything there?”

“I was not missing anything even before I got there,” replied Shitou. He meant that as his Buddha Nature was complete even before he went there, there was nothing to attain.

“Why did you go to Caoxi if you didn’t attain anything?”

Shitou went on to explain, “If I had not gone to Caoxi, how would I know that I could not attain anything?” In other words, if he had not gone to Caoxi, he would not have realized that he always had the Buddha Nature.

As we can see from this exchange, Chan masters

may not point out the meaning directly. This is the method of allusion.

IV. Conclusion

Today, we have touched on a few Chan methods—the method of reflection, the method of variation, and the method of allusion. There are many other methods, but with the limited time we have, I cannot introduce them all to you now. I would like to conclude with several poems written by the famous Chinese poet, Su Dongpo. These poems were written at different stages of his life and reflect different levels of Chan understanding. The first poem is about the very picturesque mountain range of Lushan and was written before Su Dongpo studied Chan.

*Viewed across, a range; at an angle, peaks.
Far and near, high and low, are not the same.
Not able to see the real face
Of Mount Lushan;
Precisely because one is within its hills.*

After Su Dongpo began to gain some understanding of Chan, he wrote another poem:

Misty rain of Lushan, tide of Zhejiang⁸
Not being there, many regrets.
Once there, it is empty.
Misty rain of Lushan, tide of Zhejiang.

When his understanding of Chan matured, he wrote yet another poem:

All sounds of rippling creeks are broad,
Long tongues.⁹
Mountains, nothing but pure bodies.¹⁰
Night falls, contemplating
Eighty-four thousand poems.¹¹
The next day, how to explain to anyone?

Now that you have had a glimpse into the wondrous teachings of the Chan School of Buddhism, the rest is entirely up to you. From the teachings of the Sixth Patriarch and the different Chan methods described here, we know that Chan is not taught, but is realized through oneself in one's daily life.

⁸ A lake in China

⁹ This is one of the thirty-two remarkable features of the Buddha.

¹⁰ Pure bodies of Buddhas.

¹¹ Symbolizes the eighty-four thousand Dharma methods.

About the Author

Venerable Master Hsing Yun

Venerable Master Hsing Yun was born in Jiangdu, Jiangsu Province, China, in 1927. Tonsured under Venerable Master Zhikai at age twelve, he became a novice monk at Qixia Vinaya School and Jiaoshan Buddhist College. He was fully ordained in 1941, and is the 48th Patriarch of the Linji (Rinzai) Chan School.

He went to Taiwan in 1949 where he undertook the revitalization of Chinese Mahayana Buddhism on the island with a range of activities novel for its time. In 1967, he founded the Fo Guang Shan (Buddha's Light Mountain) Buddhist Order, and has since established more than a hundred temples in Taiwan and on every continent worldwide. Hsi Lai Temple, the United States Headquarters of Fo Guang Shan, was built outside Los Angeles in 1988.

At present, there are nearly two thousand monks and nuns in the Fo Guang Shan Buddhist Order. The

organization also oversees sixteen Buddhist colleges; five publishing houses, including Buddha's Light Publishing and Hsi Lai University Press; four universities, one of which is Hsi Lai University in Los Angeles; two nursing homes for the elderly; a secondary school; a satellite television station; and an orphanage.

A prolific writer and an inspiring speaker, Master Hsing Yun has written many books on Buddhist sutras and a wide spectrum of topics over the past five decades. Most of his speeches and lectures have been compiled into essays defining Humanistic Buddhism and outlining its practice. Some of his writings and lectures have been translated into various languages, such as English, Spanish, German, Russian, Japanese, Korean, etc.

The Venerable Master is also the founder of the Buddha's Light International Association, a worldwide organization of lay Buddhists dedicated to the propagation of Buddhism, with over 130 chapters and a membership of more than a million.

About Publisher

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As long as Venerable Master Hsing Yun has been a Buddhist monk, he has had a strong belief that books and other documentation of the Buddha's teachings unite us emotionally, help us practice Buddhism at a higher altitude, and continuously challenge our views on how we define and live our lives.

In 1996, the Fo Guang Shan International Translation Center was established with this goal in mind. This marked the beginning of a string of publications translated into various languages from the Master's original writings in Chinese. Presently, several translation centers have been set up worldwide. Centers that coordinate translation or publication projects are located in Los Angeles and San Diego, USA; Sydney, Australia; Berlin, Germany; Argentina; South Africa; and Japan.

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lished to publish Buddhist books translated by Fo Guang Shan International Translation Center as well as other valuable Buddhist works. Buddha's Light Publishing is committed to building bridges between East and West, Buddhist communities, and cultures. All proceeds from our book sales support Buddhist propagation efforts.

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