



Platform Sutra Hui-Neng (6th Patriarch of Zen)

Chapter I Autobiography of Hui-Neng

Once when the Patriarch had come to Pao-lam Monastery, Prefect Wai of Shiu-chow and other officials came there to invite him to deliver public lectures on Buddhism in the hall of Tai-fan Temple in the city (Canton).

When the time came, there were assembled Prefect Wai, government officials and Confucian scholars about thirty each, bhikshu, bhikshuni, Taoists and laymen, nearly a thousand in all. After the Patriarch had taken his seat, the congregation in a body paid him homage and asked him to speak on the fundamental truths of Buddhism. Whereupon, His Eminence delivered the following address:—

Learned Audience, our self-nature which is the seed or kernel of Bodhi (the Wisdom that comes with enlightenment) is pure by nature and by making right use of it we can reach Buddhahood directly. Let me tell you something about my own life and how I came into possession of this inner teaching of our Ch'an School.

My father, a native of Fan-yang, was dismissed from his official post and banished to become a commoner in Sun-chow in Kwang-tung. My father died when I was quite young leaving my mother poor and miserable, to my great misfortune. We moved to Kwang-chow (now Canton) and lived in very bad circumstances. I was selling firewood in the market one day when one of my customers ordered some to be sent to his shop. Upon delivery and payment for the same as I went outside I found a man reciting a Sutra. No sooner had I heard the text of this Sutra than my mind became at once enlightened. I asked the man the name of the book he was reciting and was told that it was the "Diamond Sutra" (*Vajrakkhedika*). I asked him where he came from and why he recited this particular Sutra. He replied that he came from the Tung-tsan Monastery in the Wong-mui District of Kee-chow; that the Abbot in charge of this temple was Hwang-yan who was the Fifth Patriarch and had about a thousand disciples under him; and that when he went there to pay homage to the Patriarch, he found him lecturing on this Diamond Sutra. He further told me that his Eminence was in the habit of encouraging the laity as well as his monks to recite this scripture, as by so doing they might realise their own essence-of-mind and thereby reach Buddhahood directly.

It must be due to my good karma accumulated from past lives that I heard about this and that later on I was given ten taels for the maintenance of my mother by a man who advised me to go to Wong-mui to interview the Fifth Patriarch. After arrangements had been made for my mother's support, I left for Wong-mui which took me about thirty days to reach.

I paid homage to the Patriarch and was asked where I came from and what I expected to get from him. I replied that I was a commoner from Sun-chow in Kwang-tung and had travelled far

to pay my respects to him, and then said, "I ask for nothing but Buddhahood."

The Patriarch replied: "So you are a native of Kwang-tung, are you? You evidently belong to the aborigines; how can you expect to become a Buddha?"

I replied: "Although there are Northern men and Southern men, but North or South make no difference in their Buddha-nature. An aboriginee is different from your Eminence 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 hesitate and he told me to join the other laborers at their tasks. "May I tell Your Eminence," I urged, "that Prajna (transcendental Wisdom) constantly rises in my mind. As one cannot go astray from his own nature one may be rightly called, 'a field of merit' (this is a title of honor given to monks as a monk affords the best of opportunities to others, 'to sow the seed of merit'). I do not know what work Your Eminence would ask me to do."

"This aboriginee is very witty" he remarked. "Go to the work-rooms and say no more." I then withdrew to the rear where the work of the monastery was carried on and was told by a lay brother to split firewood and hull rice.

More than eight months after the Patriarch met me one day and said, "I know that your knowledge of Buddhism is very sound, but I have to refrain from speaking with you lest evil men should harm you. Do you understand?" "Yes Sir, I understand," I replied. "And I will not go near your hall, lest people take notice of me."

One day the Patriarch assembled all his disciples and said to them: "The question of incessant rebirth is a very momentous one, but instead of trying to free yourselves from that bitter sea of life and death, you men, day after day, seem to be going after tainted merits only. Merit will be of no help to you if your essence of mind is polluted and clouded. Go now and seek for the transcendental wisdom that is within your own minds and then write me a stanza about it. He who gets the clearest idea of what Mind-essence is will be given the insignia of the Patriarch; I will give him the secret teaching of the Dharma, and will appoint him to be the Sixth Patriarch. Go away quickly, now, and do not delay in writing the stanza; deliberation is quite unnecessary and will be of no use. The one who has realised Essence of Mind can testify to it at once as soon as he is spoken to about it. He cannot lose sight of it, even if he were engaged in a battle."

Having received this instruction, the disciples withdrew and said to one another, "There is no use of our making an effort to write a stanza and submit it to His Eminence; the Patriarchship is bound to go to Elder Shin-shau, our Master, anyway. Why go through the form of writing, it will only be a waste of energy." Hearing this they decided to write nothing, saying, "Why should we take the trouble to do it? Hereafter we will simply follow our Master Shin-shau wherever he goes and will look to him for guidance."

Shin-shau reasoned within himself, "Considering that I am their Master, none of them will take part in competition. I wonder whether I should write a stanza and submit it to His Eminence, or not. If I do not, how can the Patriarch know how deep or how superficial my knowledge is? If my object is to get the Dharma, my motive is pure. If it is to get the Patriarchship, then it is bad; my mind would be that of a worldling and my action would amount to a theft of the Patriarch's holy seat. But if I do not submit the stanza, I will lose my chance of getting the Dharma. It is very difficult to know what to do."

In front of the Patriarch's hall there were three corridors the walls of which were to be painted by a court artist named Lo-chun, with pictures suggested by 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 Shin-shau had composed his stanza he made several attempts to submit it, but his mind was so perturbed that he was prevented from doing it. Then he suggested to himself, "It would be better for me to write it

on the wall of the corridor and let the Patriarch find it himself. If he approves it, then I will go to pay him homage and tell him that it was done by me; but if he disapproves it,—well, then I have wasted several years' time in this mountain receiving homage which I did not deserve. If I fail, what progress have I made in learning Buddhism?"

At midnight of that night, he went secretly to write his stanza on the wall of the south corridor, so that the Patriarch might know to what spiritual insight he had attained. The stanza read:—

*“Our body may be compared to the Bodhi-tree;
While our mind is a mirror bright.
Carefully we cleanse and watch them hour by hour,
And let no dust collect upon them.”*

As soon as he had written it he returned at once to his room, so no one knew what he had done. In the quiet of his room he pondered: “When the Patriarch sees my stanza tomorrow, if he is pleased with it it will show that I am (spiritually) ready for the Dharma; but if he disapproves of it, then it will mean that I am unfit for the Dharma owing to misdeeds in previous lives and karmic accumulations that so thickly becloud my mind. What will the Patriarch say about it? How difficult it is to speculate.” He could neither sleep nor sit at ease; and so in this vein he kept on thinking until dawn.

In the morning the Patriarch sent for Lo, the court artist, to have the walls painted with pictures and went with him to the south corridor. The Patriarch noticed the stanza and said to the artist, “I am sorry to have troubled you to come so far, but the walls do not need to be painted now. The Sutra says, ‘All forms and phenomena are transient and illusive’; we will leave the stanza here so that people may study the stanza and recite it. If they put its teachings into actual practice, they will be saved from the misery of being born in evil realms of existence. Any one who practices it will gain great merit.” The Patriarch ordered incense to be burnt before it, and instructed all his disciples to pay homage to it and to recite it, so that they might realise Essence of Mind. After his disciples had recited it, they all exclaimed, “Well done!”

That midnight the Patriarch sent for Shin-shau and asked if he had written the stanza. Shin-shau admitted that he had written it and then added: “I am not so vain as to expect to get the Patriarchship, but I wish Your Eminence would kindly tell me whether my stanza shows the least grain of wisdom.”

“To attain supreme enlightenment,” replied the Patriarch, “one must be able to know spontaneously one’s own self-nature which is neither created nor can it be annihilated. From one momentary sensation to another, one should always be able to realise Essence of Mind; then all things will be free from restraint. Once the self-nature of Mind-essence is realised, forever after one will be free from delusion, and under all circumstances, one’s mind will remain in a state of ‘Suchness’ (*tathata*). Such a state of mind is absolute truth. If you can see things in such a state of mind you have realised Essence of Mind, which is the supreme enlightenment. You had better return now and think it over for a couple of days and then submit another stanza. In case the new stanza shows that you have entered ‘the door of enlightenment,’ I will transmit to you the robe and the Dharma.”

Shin-shau made obeisance to the Patriarch and went away. For several days he tried in vain to write another stanza, which upset his mind so much that he was as ill at ease as though he was in a nightmare; he could find comfort neither in sitting nor walking.

Two days after, it happened that a boy who was passing by the room where I was hulling rice, was loudly reciting the stanza written by Shin-shau. As soon as I heard it I knew at once

that its composer had not yet realised Essence of Mind. Although at that time I never had had instruction about it, I already had a general idea of it. “What stanza is this,” I asked the boy. “You aboriginee,” he said, “don’t you know about it? The Patriarch told his disciples that the question of rebirth was a momentous one, and those who wished to inherit his robe and the Dharma should write him a stanza and the one who had the true idea of Mind-essence would get them and become the Sixth Patriarch. Elder Shin-shau 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 teachings into actual practice would attain great merit and be saved from being born in the evil realms of existence.”

I told the boy that I wished to learn the stanza also, so that I might have the benefit of it in future life. Although I had been hulling rice for eight months, I had never been to the hall, so I asked the boy to show me where the stanza was written, so that I might make obeisance to it. The boy took me there and as I was illiterate, I asked him to read it to me. A petty officer of the Kong-chow District, named Chang Fat-yung, who happened to be there, then read it clearly. When he had finished reading, I told him that I, also, had composed a stanza and asked him to write it for me. “Extraordinary,” he exclaimed, “that you, also, can compose a stanza.”

“If you are a seeker of supreme enlightenment, you will not despise a beginner,” I said.

“Please recite your stanza,” said he, “I will write it down for you, but if you should succeed in getting the Dharma, do not forget to deliver me.”

My stanza read as follows:

*“Neither is there Bohi-tree,
Nor case of mirror bright.
Since intrinsically all is void
Where can dust collect?”*

Later on seeing that a crowd was collecting, the Patriarch came out and erased the stanza with his shoe lest jealous ones should do me injury. Judging by this, the crowd took it for granted that the author of it had also not yet realised Mind-essence.

Next day the Patriarch came secretly to the room where the rice was being hulled and seeing me at work with the stone pestle, said, “A seeker of the Path risks his life for the Dharma. Should he 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 went away.

Knowing what his signal meant, in the third watch of the night, I went to his room. Using his robe as a screen so that no one would 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 suddenly became thoroughly enlightened and realised that all things in the universe are Mind-essence itself.

I said to the Patriarch, “Who could have conceived that Mind-essence is intrinsically pure! Who could have conceived that Mind-essence is intrinsically free from becoming and annihilation! That Mind-essence is intrinsically self-sufficient, and free from change! Who could have conceived that all things are manifestations of Mind-essence!”

Thus at midnight, to the knowledge of no one, was the Dharma transmitted to me, and I consequently became the inheritor of the teachings of the “Sudden” School, and the possessor of the robe and the begging-bowl.

“You are now the Sixth Patriarch,” said His Eminence. “Take good care of yourself and deliver as many sentient beings as possible. Spread the teaching; keep the teaching alive; do not let it come to an end. Listen to my stanza:

*‘Sentient beings who sow seed of Enlightenment
In the field of causation, will reap the fruit of Buddhahood.
Inanimate objects which are void of Buddha-nature
Sow not and reap not.’*

His Eminence further said: “When Patriarch Bodhidharma first came to China, few Chinese had confidence in him and so this robe has been handed down as a testimony from one Patriarch to another. As to the Dharma, as a rule it is transmitted from heart to heart and the recipient is expected to understand it and to realise it by his own efforts. From time immemorial, it has been the practice for one Buddha to pass on to his successor the quintessence of the Dharma, and for one Patriarch to transmit to another, from mind to mind, the esoteric teaching. As the robe may give cause for dispute, you will be the last one to inherit it. If you should again hand it down to a successor, your life would be in imminent danger. You must now leave this place as quickly as you can, lest some one should harm you.”

I asked him, “Where shall I go?” and he replied, “Stop at Wei and seclude yourself at Wui.”

As it was the middle of the night when I thus received the begging-bowl and the robe, I told the Patriarch that as I was a Southerner I did not know the mountain trails and it would be impossible for me to get down to the river. “You need not worry,” he replied, “I will go with you.” He then accompanied me to the Kiu-kiang landing where we got a boat. As he started to do the rowing himself, I asked him to be seated and let me handle the oar. He replied, “It is only right for me to get you across.” (This is an illusion to the sea of birth and death which one has to cross before the shore of Nirvana can be reached.) To this I replied, “(So long as I was) under illusion, I was dependent on you to get me across, but now it is different. It was my fortune to be born on the frontier and my education is very deficient, but I have had the honor to inherit the Dharma from you; since I am now enlightened, it is only right for me to cross the sea of birth and death by my own effort to realise my own Essence of Mind.”

“Quite so, quite so,” he agreed. “Beginning with you (Ch’an) Buddhism will become very widespread. Three years from your leaving me I shall pass from this world. You may start on your journey now; go as fast as you can toward the South. Do not begin preaching too soon; (Ch’an) Buddhism is not to be easily spread.”

After saying good-bye, I left him and walked toward the South. In about two months I reached the Tai-yu Mountain where I noticed several hundred men were in pursuit of me with the intention of recovering the robe and begging-bowl. Among them, the most vigilant was a monk of the name of Wei-ming whose surname was Chen. In lay-life he had been a general of the fourth rank. His manner was rough and his temper hot. When he overtook me, I threw the robe and the begging-bowl on a rock, saying, “This robe is nothing but a testimonial; what is the use of taking it away by force?” When he reached the rock, he tried to pick them up but could not. Then in astonishment he shouted, “Lay Brother, Lay Brother, (Hui-neng, although appointed the Sixth Patriarch, had not yet formally been admitted to the Order), I have come for the Dharma; I do not care for the robe.” Whereupon I came from my hiding place and took the position on the rock of a Patriarch. He made obeisance and said, “Lay Brother, I beg you to teach me.”

“Since the object of your coming is for the Dharma,” said I, “please refrain from thinking about anything and try to keep your mind perfectly empty and receptive. I will then teach you.” When he had done this for a considerable time, I said, “Venerable Sir, at the particular moment when you are thinking of neither good nor evil, what is your real self-nature (the word is, physiognomy)?”

As soon as he heard this he at once become enlightened, but he asked, "Apart from these sayings and ideas handed down by the Patriarchs from generation to generation, are there still any esoteric teachings?"

"What I can tell you is not esoteric," I replied, "If you turn your light inward, you will find what is esoteric within your own mind."

"In spite of my stay in Wong-mui," said he, "I did not realise my own self-nature. Now, thanks to your guidance, I realise it in the same way a water-drinker knows how hot and how cold the water is. Lay Brother, I am now your disciple." I replied, "If this is the case, then you and I are fellow disciples of the Fifth Patriarch. Please take good care of yourself." He paid homage and departed.

Some time after I reached Tso-kai, but as evil-doers were again persecuting me, I took refuge in Sze-wui where I staid with a party of hunters for fifteen years. They used to put me to watch their nets, but when I found living creatures entangled in them I would set them free. At meal time I would put vegetables in the same pan in which they cooked their meat. Some of them questioned me and I explained to them that I could only eat vegetables. Occasionally I talked to them in a way that befitted their understanding. One day I bethought myself that I ought not to pass so secluded a life all the time; I felt that the time had come for me to propagate the Dharma. Accordingly I left there and went to the Fat-shin Temple in Canton.

At the time I reached that temple, the monk Yen-chung, Master of Dharma, was lecturing on the Maha Parinirvana Sutra. It happened one day when a pennant was being blown about by the wind, that two monks entered into a dispute as to what was in motion, the wind or the pennant. As they failed to settle their difference, I suggested that it was neither; that what actually moved was their own mind. The whole group was surprised by what I said and the Master Yen-chung invited me to a seat of honor and questioned me about various knotty points in the Sutra. Seeing that my answers were precise and accurate, that they inferred more than book knowledge, he said to me, "Lay Brother, you must be an extraordinary man. I was told long ago that the inheritor of the Fifth Patriarch's robe and Dharma had come to the South; very likely you are the man?"

To this I politely assented. He made obeisance and courteously asked me to show to the assembly the robe and begging-bowl which I had inherited. He further asked what instructions I had received at the time the Fifth Patriarch had transmitted the Dharma to me.

I replied, "Apart from a discussion on the realisation of Mind-essence, he gave me no other instruction. He did not refer to Dhyana nor to Emancipation." The Master asked, "Why not?" I replied, "Because that would mean there were two ways in Buddhism. There cannot be two ways; in Buddhism there is only one way." The Master then asked, "What is the only way?"

I replied, "The Maha Parinirvana Sutra which you are expounding teaches that Buddha-nature is the only way. For example: in that Sutra King-ko-kwai-tak, a Bodhisattva, asked the Buddha whether those who commit the four serious sins, or the five deadly sins, or are heretics, etc., would thereby root out their 'element of goodness' and their Buddha-nature. Buddha replied, 'There are two kinds of 'goodness-elements': an eternal element, and a non-eternal. Since Buddha-nature is neither eternal nor non-eternal, their 'element of goodness' is not eradicated. There are good ways and evil ways, but since Buddha-nature is neither good nor evil, Buddhism is known as having no two ways. From the point of view of ordinary folks, the component parts of a personality and the factors of consciousness are two separate aggregates, but enlightened men know and understand that they are not dual in nature. It is that nature of non-duality that is Buddha-nature."

Master Yen-chung was pleased with my answer. Putting his hands together in token of respect, he said, "My interpretation of the Sutra is as worthless as a heap of debris, while your

discourse is as valuable as pure gold.” Subsequently he conducted a ceremony of initiation, receiving me into the order, and then asked me to accept him as a pupil.

Thenceforth under the Bodhi-tree I have discoursed about the teachings of the Fourth and Fifth Patriarchs. Since the Dharma was transmitted to me in Tung Mountain, I have gone through many hardships and often my life seemed to be hanging by a thread. Today I have had the honor of meeting Your Highness, and you, officials, monks and nuns, Taoists and laymen, in this great assembly. I must ascribe this good fortune to our happy connection in previous kalpas, as well as to our common accumulated merits in making offerings to various Buddhas in our past incarnations. Otherwise we would have had no chance of hearing the teachings of the “Sudden” School of Ch’an and thereby laying the foundation of our present success in understanding the Dharma.

This teaching is not a system of my own invention, but has been handed down by the Patriarchs. Those who wish to hear the teaching should first purify their own minds; and after hearing it, each must clear up his own doubts, even as the Sages have done in the past.

At the end of the address, the assembly felt rejoiced, made obeidance and departed.

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