

Selections from the *Liuzu tanjing*, the “Platform Sūtra of the Sixth Patriarch”

A sūtra spoken by someone other than a buddha? The very title establishes that the experience of enlightenment confers on one the confidence and authority to teach Dharma as the buddhas do. After all, it is a well-established principle in Buddhism that the Truth is independent of the presence or absence of a buddha in the world. Others can—and presumably do—discover and can teach the same Truth.

The Platform Sūtra purports to be a series of “sermons” delivered by Huineng (638–713), the sixth patriarch of Chan.¹ In addition to exposing his teachings, it relates the founding myth of the Chan lineage of which Huineng is a part: how an itinerant, scarcely literate seller of firewood demonstrated his understanding of the Dharma and became the sixth Chinese patriarch in a line of enlightened masters dating all the way back to the Buddha himself. The fact that the lineage, and even Huineng’s place in it, was a pious legend, the result of fierce polemical battles among contending Chan factions, has long been obscured by the dominant position in Chan Buddhism that Huineng’s faction went on to assume by the end of the ninth century.

In terms of doctrine, the scripture relies heavily on the central messages of the Prajñāpāramitā sūtras, the Dasheng qixinlun (Awakening of Faith in the Mahāyāna), and the Vimalakīrti sūtra. It is noted particularly for its teachings of the identity of meditation and wisdom, the purity of the Buddha nature that inheres in us all, and the nondualism that arises when one abandons notions of form, permanence, and stability—a state of no-thought—through the meditative experience. A few pertinent passages on these themes are included here. (Section headings in blue supplied here for clarity.)

[The Identity of Wisdom and Meditation]

13] “Good friends, my teaching of the Dharma takes meditation (*ding*) and wisdom (*hui*) as its basis. Never under any circumstances say mistakenly that meditation and wisdom are different; they are a unity, not two things. Meditation itself is the substance of wisdom; wisdom itself is the function of meditation. At the very moment when there is wisdom, then meditation exists in wisdom; at the very moment when there is meditation, then wisdom exists in meditation. Good friends, this means that meditation and wisdom are alike. Students, be careful not to say that meditation gives rise to wisdom, or that wisdom gives rise to meditation, or that meditation and wisdom are different from each other. To hold this view implies that things have duality—if good is spoken while the mind is not good, meditation and wisdom will not be alike. If mind and speech are both good, then the internal and the external are the same and meditation and wisdom are alike. The practice of self-awakening does not lie in verbal arguments. If you argue which comes first, meditation or

¹ The work was compiled several decades after the death of Huineng. How faithfully it represents his actual teachings, and even the lineage of its compilers, remain open to scholarly investigation.

wisdom, you are deluded people. You won't be able to settle the argument and instead will cling to objective things, and will never escape from the four states of phenomena.

[The Samādhi of Oneness]

[14] "The *samādhi* (*meditative state*) of oneness is direct (straightforward) mind at all times, walking, staying, sitting, and lying. The *Jingming jing* (*Vimalakīrti sūtra*) says: Direct mind is the place of practice; direct mind is the Pure Land.' Do not with a dishonest mind speak of the straightforwardness of the Dharma. If while speaking of the *samādhi* of oneness, you fail to practice straightforward mind, you will not be disciples of the Buddha. Just practicing direct mind, and in all things having no attachments whatsoever, is called the *samādhi* of oneness. The deluded man clings to the characteristics of things, adheres to the *samādhi* of oneness, [thinks] that straightforward mind is sitting without moving and casting aside delusions without letting things arise in the mind. This he considers to be the *samādhi* of oneness. This kind of practice is the same as insentientcy and the cause of an obstruction to the Dao. Dao must be something that circulates freely; why should he impede it? If the mind does not abide in things, the Dao circulates freely; if the mind abides in things, it becomes entangled. If sitting in meditation without moving is good, why did Vimalakīrti scold Śāriputra for sitting in meditation in the forest?

"Good friends, some people teach men to sit viewing the mind and viewing purity, not moving and not activating the mind, and to this they devote their efforts. Deluded people do not realize that this is wrong, cling to this doctrine, and become confused. There are many such people. Those who instruct in this way are, from the outset, greatly mistaken.

[15] "Good friends, how then are meditation and wisdom alike? They are like the lamp and the light it gives forth. If there is a lamp there is light; if there is no lamp there is no light. The lamp is the substance of light; the light is the function of the lamp. Thus, although they have two names, in substance they are not two. Meditation and wisdom are also like this.

[16] "Good friends, in the Dharma there is no sudden or gradual, but among people some are keen and others dull. The deluded recommend the gradual method, the enlightened practice the sudden teaching. To understand the original mind of yourself is to see into your own original nature. Once enlightened, there is from the outset no distinction between these two methods; those who are not enlightened will for long *kalpas* be caught in the cycle of transmigration.

[The Doctrine of No-Thought]

[17] "Good friends, in this teaching of mine, from ancient times up to the present, all have set up no-thought as the main doctrine, non-form as the substance, and non-abiding as the basis. Non-form is to be separated from form even when associated with form. No-thought is not to think even when involved in thought. Non-abiding is the original nature of man.

"Successive thoughts do not stop; prior thoughts, present thoughts, and future thoughts follow one after the other without cessation. If one instant of thought is cut off, the Dharma body separates from the physical body, and in the midst of successive thoughts there will be no place for attachment to anything. If one instant of thought clings, then successive thoughts cling; this is known as being fettered. If in all things successive thoughts do not cling, then you are unfettered. Therefore, non-abiding is made the basis.

"Good friends, being outwardly separated from all forms, this is non-form. When you are separated from form, the substance of your nature is pure. Therefore, non-form is made the substance.

"To be unstained in all environments is called no-thought. If on the basis of your own thoughts you separate from environment, then, in regard to things, thoughts are not produced. If you stop thinking of the myriad things and cast aside all thoughts, as soon as one instant of thought is cut off you will be reborn in another realm. Students, take care! Don't rest in objective things and the subjective mind. [If you do so] it will be bad enough that you yourself are in error, yet how much worse that you encourage others in their mistakes. The deluded man, however, does not himself see and slanders the teachings of the *sūtras*. Therefore no-thought is established as a doctrine. Because man in his delusion has thoughts in relation to his environment, heterodox ideas stemming from these thoughts arise, and passions and false views are produced from them. Therefore this teaching has established no-thought as a doctrine.

"Men of the world, separate yourselves from views; do not activate thoughts. If there were no thinking, then no-thought would have no place to exist. 'No' is the 'no' of what? 'Thought' means 'thinking' of what? 'No' is the separation from the dualism that produces the passions. 'Thought' means thinking of the original nature of True Reality. True Reality is the substance of thoughts; thoughts are the function of True Reality. If you give rise to thoughts from your self-nature, then, although you see, hear, perceive, and know, you are not stained by the manifold environments and are always free. The *Vimalakīrti Sūtra* says: 'Externally, while distinguishing well all the forms of the various *dharma*s, internally he stands firm within the First Principle.'

[19] . . . "Good friends, see for yourselves the purity of your own natures, practice and accomplish for yourselves. Your own nature is the *dharmakāya*, and self-practice is the practice of Buddha; by self-accomplishment you may achieve the Buddha Way for yourselves.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, a version of the Platform Sūtra dating from the year 780 was discovered at Dunhuang, the site of a flourishing Buddhist community along the ancient Silk Road from the fourth to the thirteen centuries. This version, several centuries older and thus closer to the "original" teachings of Huineng than hitherto existing versions, was translated into English as The Platform Sutra of the Sixth Patriarch: The Text of the Tun-huang Manuscript in 1967 by Philip Yampolsky, whose work appears here.