



Chan Teachings of Huineng

Buddhism in Every Step B3

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Chan Teachings of Huineng

I. The Sixth Patriarch's Platform Sutra

Who was Huineng?

The *Sixth Patriarch's Platform Sutra*, often simplified into the *Platform Sutra*, is a sacred text of the *Chan*, or meditation, School. Though of particular importance to the Chan School, the sutra's influence extends to many other Buddhist schools. It is also considered one of the finest works of Chinese literature.

The *Platform Sutra* is a collection of Dharma talks given by Venerable Huineng, the Sixth Patriarch of the Chan School of Buddhism. Huineng's fascinating life is something of a legend in itself. Though the Sixth Patriarch was said to be an illiterate wood-cutter, due to his store of merit from previous lives and his quick grasp of the Dharma, he quickly

achieved enlightenment under the guidance of the Fifth Patriarch and became a great master. His influence can still be felt today.

I would, however, like to take this opportunity to state that the Sixth Patriarch was far from illiterate. On the contrary, he was an extremely well read, and had profound insights regarding 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 while he was selling firewood, and overheard someone recite the *Diamond Sutra*. The *Platform Sutra* also records how the Sixth Patriarch had a sworn brother named Liu Zhilue. Liu had an aunt who was a bhiksuni named Wujinzang. She often recited the *Nirvana Sutra*. One day, she asked the Sixth Patriarch to explain to her the meaning of the sutra, and the supposedly illiterate Sixth Patriarch interpreted the sutra for her. From other anecdotes in the *Platform Sutra*, we know that the Sixth Patriarch was a learned man.

He once traveled to the Xishan Cave in the Lechang County to study with Chan Master Zhiyuan. He also studied the *Ascetic Practices Sutra* under Chan Master Huiji.

In the *Platform Sutra*, Huineng calls himself *bushizi* (不識字), one who “doesn’t know [Chinese] characters,” but this is simply a figure of speech that reflects Huineng’s humility. It’s similar to how some people claim that, “Oh, I’m not so good at that,” or “I can’t do that very well.” It shows that the person is humble. It does not literally mean that the person is ignorant. If we look at the breadth of the Sixth Patriarch’s knowledge and the plethora of skillful means he used to expound the Dharma, we can clearly see that he was not uneducated. We can say that the Sixth Patriarch wasn’t really a person who “did not know Chinese characters.”

The Golden Age of Chinese Buddhism

Huineng was born at a time when Buddhism was flourishing in China. It was during this time that the Venerable Xuanzang 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.¹ At the same time, Vinaya Master Daoxuan, the founder of the Vinaya School,² was teaching the *Four Part Vinaya* at Mount Zhongnan. Venerable Shandao, called the “Monk of Brightness,” was also in Changan, spreading the teachings of the Pure Land School and advocating the practice of reciting Amitabha Buddha’s name. In addition, Venerable Fazang Xianshou, a frequent lecturer at the imperial palace, taught and composed commentaries on the *Flower Adornment Sutra*. This was a period in which many great masters lived and numerous schools were founded. It was the golden age of Chinese Buddhism.

Soon after Huineng attained enlightenment, the Fifth Patriarch transmitted the Dharma to Huineng. As the Sixth Patriarch of the Chan School, Huineng is known primarily for his teachings on “sudden enlightenment,” in contrast to “gradual practice,” and his methods of teaching without relying on written or spoken language. During the time following Huineng, many prominent Chan masters emerged and

1. 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.

2. The school which emphasizes discipline.

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 lending impetus to the others, stimulating intellectual discussion and drawing people to Buddhism. Huineng's teachings on sudden enlightenment drew many Buddhist scholars to his school, distinguishing Chan from other Buddhist Schools and leaving an indelible mark in Chinese Buddhist history. The success of the Chan School also led to the flourishing of many other Buddhist sects.

Practicing Chan: More Than Sitting

When people hear the word “Chan,” they tend to picture sitting meditation. Most people think that to practice Chan means sitting in meditation like an old monk in deep contemplation. But we can see from the Sixth Patriarch's teachings that this is not the case.

Once, an imperial attendant named Xuejian asked the Sixth Patriarch, “The virtuous Chan practitioners in the capital all say that to attain the Way, one must perform sitting meditation, for no one has attained liberation without meditative concentration. May I ask what the teacher has to say about this?”

The Sixth Patriarch replied, “The Way is awakened to from the mind. How can it be from sitting?” This is a very important revelation. We need to understand that Chan cannot be realized simply by adjusting our physical posture, either by sitting or lying down. How do you realize Chan? We realize Chan during our daily activities, even while in motion. Gesturing our hands, moving our eyebrows, or blinking our eyes can help us realize sudden enlightenment and see our intrinsic nature.

A brick cannot be polished to shine like a mirror, just as merely sitting in meditation will not make someone a Buddha. In practicing Chan and seeking the Way, the most important thing is to see our intrinsic nature. If we can understand this, we can experience the world of Chan.

II. An Introduction to Chan

Chan and Daily Life

As espoused by the Sixth Patriarch, the Chan School does not rely on writing or speech. Words cannot describe Chan. In the past, if someone recited the name of the Buddha in a meditation hall, they would be asked to rinse out their mouth for three days. If

anyone spoke, they would be given thirty lashes. This may sound excessive, 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 attain enlightenment. The teachings of Chan are transmitted from mind to mind, for Chan is beyond words. If we try to explain Chan in words, what we are explaining is only a semblance of Chan.

Chan is something that cannot be said, yet it is something that cannot be left unspoken. Thus, the Chan School emphasizes the importance of passing on the teaching from teacher to student. Like the passing of a baton in a relay race, the Chan teacher may give a student who has understood the true meaning of Chan a certain object to symbolize that the teaching has been passed down to the next generation. At other times, words can be used to denote the passing of the teaching.

While analysis and examination are critical skills in acquiring worldly knowledge, a Chan master needs but a few words to reveal the secrets of the universe. Through the practice of non-discrimination, Chan helps us realize transcendence. People who study Chan not only must be clever and bright, they must

have a sense of humor. When we read in various Chan texts the dialogs between great Chan masters, we can see for ourselves the humor and subtleties of the Chan teachings.

This is not a discussion of the Chan School's teachings, of sudden enlightenment, or how to meditate. Instead, I wish to share the joy and freedom that is available to us if we integrate a bit of Chan into our everyday life.

Qingyuan Xingsi, one of the leading disciples of the Sixth Patriarch, once said, "Before practicing Chan, I saw mountains as mountains and rivers as rivers. While practicing Chan, I saw mountains as not mountains and rivers as not rivers. After awakening through practicing Chan, I saw mountains as mountains and rivers as rivers.

Before Qingyuan Xingsi practiced Chan, he looked at the external world. Like the rest of us, he saw mountains as mountains and rivers as rivers. But as he began to practice Chan, his mind and vision transcended the ordinary world; he did not look at mountains as mountains or rivers as rivers. After he attained enlightenment, his internal world was harmonized with the external world. He could look at the world both with a mundane view and a

supramundane view. In this state of harmony, he still looked at mountains as mountains and rivers as rivers. But although mountains and rivers were still mountains and rivers to him, he now looked at them with a different state of mind.

I am not suggesting that everyone should meditate like an old monk, or seek enlightenment like the Sixth Patriarch. We need not immediately dive into such strenuous practices. But if we can approach our lives with a bit of transcendence and spare a few moments every day to practice Chan, then we will be able to use the mind in new, wondrous ways, different from ordinary people. This is not as difficult as it sounds. Take for example the act of drinking tea. While some of us may find a certain herbal tea pleasant and fragrant, others may find the taste bitter and strong. Similarly, while some people like hot, spicy food, others find the same food unpalatable. Due to our different preferences, the same food or drink appeals differently 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 Chan into our daily lives, our state of mind will become elevated. We will look at life differently. By learning about the teaching methods of the Sixth Patriarch, we can

catch a glimpse of what Chan is, and our lives will be greatly enriched.

Where Are You From?

The *Platform Sutra* describes the first meeting between the Fifth Patriarch and Huineng. When the Fifth Patriarch first saw Huineng, he asked him, “Where are you from? What do you seek?”

“I am a commoner from Xinzhou in Lingnan. I have traveled far to pay homage to you. I seek to be a Buddha and nothing else,” answered Huineng.

The Fifth Patriarch said, “You are from Lingnan and also a barbarian! How do you expect to be a Buddha?”

Huineng replied, “Though people may be northerners or southerners, Buddha nature has no north or south. While my barbaric body is different from yours, Venerable Master, what difference is there in Buddha nature?”

When the Fifth Patriarch heard Huineng’s reply, he developed a high opinion of the future Sixth Patriarch. Eventually, the Fifth Patriarch passed the lineage (symbolized by his robe and bowl) to Huineng. Later, when he taught the Dharma as the Sixth Patriarch, he asked the same question of his

many disciples. I have chosen three such examples to share here.

When Chan Master Nanyue Huairang met with the Sixth Patriarch, the Sixth Patriarch asked him, “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 with the Sixth Patriarch 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’s monastery, he 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, the personal Chan teacher of emperors Suzong and Daizong of the Tang dynasty, first arrived at Caoxi, 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, curiosity is important. Conversations between Chan masters usually take the form of questions. When the Fifth Patriarch asked Huineng where he came from, he established the causes for Huineng to become his disciple, and later the Sixth Patriarch. In his later years, the Sixth Patriarch used this same question to help his students find their intrinsic nature.

III. Teaching Methods of the Chan School

Chan Questioning and Counter-questioning

One Chan method of teaching is to answer or return a question with another question. This method can lead to sudden enlightenment. 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 replied calmly, “Can you show me a spot where the Buddha is not present? I need to spit again.”

This Chan master realized the fact that Dharma nature permeates all space; the Dharma body fills the whole universe. Those who reprimanded the Chan master believed that they were being respectful of the Buddha, when in fact their behavior showed that they did not truly understand the Buddha. The Dharma body, the true form of the Buddha, is present everywhere. Hence the Chan master's request, "Can you show me a spot where the Buddha is not present?" Can you answer this question? If you cannot answer, it means that you do not understand the Dharma. Even to those who understand the Dharma, such a counter-question can heighten their wisdom 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, "Who is the 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, "Who is the Buddha?" The other replied, "Who are you?" The

conversation appears simple, but its subtle meaning is boundless.

The Fourth Patriarch, Daoxin, once asked the Third Patriarch, Sengcan, “How can I be liberated?”

“Who binds you?” asked Sengcan.

“Nobody binds me,” answered Daoxin.

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

From this series of questions, we can see that we are not so much bound by external forces as we are bound by ourselves. There is a common Chinese saying that carries a similar meaning: “There are no hardships in the world, people create problems for themselves.” The mind is like a factory. A good factory produces quality products, while a poor factory produces defective products. Likewise, healthy minds produce good thoughts, while deluded minds produce trouble and affliction.

The usual mode of learning is to study hard and ask questions. In the Chan style of teaching, questions are often answered with more questions. This is the method of questioning and counter-questioning. Chan practitioners may direct questions to themselves. Questions may include: Who is reciting the Buddha’s name? 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 and concentrate on answering them, you will eventually attain enlightenment.

Practicing Chan is a personal effort. 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 suggested he travel south to avoid persecution by the Fifth Patriarch's other disciples. The Fifth Patriarch said to him, "I will ferry you across the river."

The Sixth Patriarch replied, "Venerable Master, please be seated. Your disciple should row"

The Fifth Patriarch again offered, "It is only fitting that I ferry you across."

The Sixth Patriarch turned him down and said, "When I was deluded, I needed a teacher to ferry me. Upon awakening, I ferry myself."

From this exchange, we can see that while our teachers are there to guide our practice, we must realize the truth through our own efforts. When we practice Chan, we should emulate the spirit of Avalokitesvara Bodhisattva and vigilantly monitor

our own minds. This is the essence of Chan, and the origin of its profound teachings. Once, a young man was paying homage to Avalokitesvara Bodhisattva in a temple. He noticed that the Avalokitesvara Bodhisattva statue held a string of prayer beads. The man said to a nearby monk, “We use prayer beads to help us recite the name of Avalokitesvara Bodhisattva. But 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. Hence, it is important that we practice and realize the truth for ourselves. The Chan method of teaching by questioning and counter-questioning, can help us open and develop our own thinking. One day, in a flash of insight, we will be able to see the truth.

Chan Opposing Answers

In the Chan School, it is quite common for a Chan master to vary the answers to a question according to the speaker's level of spiritual maturity. A Chan master may answer a question with a "yes", while at other times, he or she may answer the same question with a "no." Again, the best way to understand how this teaching method works is to hear some examples.

Chan Master Mazu Daoyi was a student of a student of the Sixth Patriarch. Whenever anyone asked him about the Dharma, he would inevitably answer, "The Buddha is the mind, the mind is the Buddha."

One day, someone asked him, "Why do you always tell people 'The Buddha is the mind, the mind is the Buddha,' whenever you are asked about the Dharma?"

Mazu answered, "When a child is crying, you have no choice but to give him a cookie. It gives him comfort."

The person asked further, "So, if a child is not crying, what would you say?"

Mazu replied, "I would say, 'There is no mind, there is no Buddha.'"

Some time later, a young Chan master by the name of Damei Fachang came from afar to learn the Dharma from Mazu. The young man said, "Please tell me, what is the Dharma?"

Mazu said to the young man, "The Buddha is the mind, the mind is the Buddha." Upon hearing this, Damei was enlightened.

After attaining enlightenment, Damei left to other places to propagate Chan Buddhism; many came to learn from him. 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 go and test Damei. When the student arrived before Damei, he asked, "Dharma brother, what did you learn from our teacher?"

Damei answered, "The Buddha is the mind, the mind is the Buddha."

As instructed by Mazu, the student said to Damei, "Did you know that our teacher no longer says 'The Buddha is the mind, the mind is the Buddha'?"

Damei asked, "What is he teaching now?"

The student said, "Our teacher is now says that 'There is no mind, there is no Buddha.'"

When he heard this, Damei frowned and said, “That old monk likes to give people a hard time. I don’t really care if he is teaching ‘There is no mind, there is no Buddha.’ I will continue teaching, ‘The Buddha is the mind, the mind is the Buddha.’”

The student then went back to Mazu and recounted the meeting to his teacher. Happily, Mazu said, “The plum is now truly ripe.”³ Damei had understood the Dharma.

Sometimes we need affirmation from others to strengthen our faith and confidence. Other times, our beliefs and understanding need to be challenged for us to truly understand. Chan Master Damei was confident in himself and refused to follow others blindly. Regardless of what his mentor Mazu was now teaching, Damei was not swayed. This kind of confidence, determination, and self-respect is the characteristic of a true Chan master.

In another example, a lay devotee once went to Chan Master Zhizang and asked, “Chan master, please tell me, are there heavens and hells?”

“Yes.”

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

3. The character *mei* in Damei’s name can also mean “plum.”

“Yes.”

“Are the law of cause and effect and the six realms of existence real?”

“Yes, it’s true.”

Regardless of what the lay devotee asked Chan Master Zhizang, he would answer in the affirmative. The lay devotee grew skeptical and finally said, “Chan Master, that cannot be true.”

Chan Master Zhizang asked, “Why?”

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, it does not exist.’ When I asked him if there are Buddhas and bodhisattvas, he said, ‘No, they do not exist.’ When I asked him if there are heavens and hells, he also said, ‘No, they do not exist.’ Why is it that you answered ‘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, “That is why Chan Master Jingshan told you that the law of cause and effect, heavens and hells, and so on and so forth do not exist. I told you that they exist because you have a wife and children.”

Despite the same set of questions, these two Chan masters gave very different answers. While the two sets of answers appear different, they actually possess similar meanings. Although they gave opposing answers, the two Chan masters are not contradicting each other. There is only one Dharma, but we may have different degrees of understanding. Jingshan’s answers of non-existence underlie a profound meaning and represent an elevated state of mind. Jingshan’s “no” is emptiness, and without emptiness, there could be no existence.

Chan Indirect Speech

What is indirect speech? When Chan masters speak, they rarely speak directly. Instead, they use

metaphors or unrelated subjects to make indirect references. This method brings people to realize the truth on their own. The following are a few examples of this method in motion.

Chan Master Zhaozhou Congren was a witty individual. People called him the “Old Buddha of Zhaozhou.” Even at the age of eighty, he continued to travel and learn. Once, in a playful mood, he made a bet with his student, Chan Master Wenyuan. He said to his student, “Let us make a bet. 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?”

Wenyuan replied, “I am sheltering myself from the summer heat!”

Zhaozhou admitted defeat and happily handed the biscuit to Wenyan. What this exchange teaches us is this: The high must be found in the lowly. Bodhi is realized in the midst of suffering. When our minds are pure, we see everything as pure. Our mind-set changes the way we see things. Even a donkey, its buttocks, its stools, and maggots can help us see the Dharma. From this example, we can see that the words of Chan masters are full of Chan teachings and rich in meaning.

In the Jingqu Temple of Wenzhou, there was a bhiksuni named Xuanji. She was a very learned bhiksuni and had once traveled to Mount Dari (which means “hills of the great sun”) to practice Chan. Later, she went to visit the Chan Master Xuefeng (which means “snow peaks”). Like the Sixth Patriarch, Xuefeng too greeted his visitors this question: “Where did you come from?”

“I came from Mount Dari,” replied Xuanji.

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

Xuanji was not intimidated and answered, “If the great sun (*dari*) had risen, the snow peak (*xuefeng*) would have melted.”

To understand Xuanji’s answer, we have to know the meaning of Xuefeng’s question. When Xuefeng

asked Xuanji if the sun had risen, he was asking her indirectly if she had realized the truth. Xuanji replied that if she had realized the truth, she would not have traveled all this way to learn from him, Xuefeng.

From Xuanji's answers, Xuefeng understood 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 know how diligent she was in her practice, so he tested her, "How much do you weave every day?"

Xuanji replied, "I don't have a thread on me." She implied that she was completely liberated, which 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, "Your robe is dragging on the ground!"

When Xuanji heard this, she turned around to look. Xuefeng broke out in laughter and said, "And you said you don't have a single thread on you." Enlightenment is something that cannot be faked. Using indirect speech in this way, Chan masters can assess if one is truly enlightened and liberated.

Once, a monk asked Zhaozhou, “What is the right way to practice Chan and attain the Way?”

Zhaozhou got up from his seat and said, “I have to go to the restroom.” He took a few steps, turned back to the monk and said, “You see, even a simple thing like this, I have to do on my own. No one can do it for me.” Zhaozhou was indirectly telling the monk that practicing Chan and attaining the Way are very personal matters that we must do on our own. In this way the Chan master was indirect, yet also crystal clear.

During the Tang dynasty, there was a great scholar by the name of Han Yu. Han Yu was prejudiced against Buddhism. Once, he tried to dissuade the emperor from throwing a grand celebration in honor of a Buddha relic arriving in China. Upset, the emperor 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 speak to. Among the handful of learned scholars who lived there was Chan Master Dadian. Han Yu decided to pay this monastic 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 Chan master 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.

Han Yu was growing impatient. Witnessing this, Dadian's attendant tapped a little bell by his master's ear, and he said out loud, "First, influence through Chan, then eradicate arrogance with wisdom. Master, your practice of Chan 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 intelligent man. He 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 Buddhism." Later, Han Yu asked the Chan master to be his teacher and took refuge in the Triple Gem.

Sometimes, spoken words are not the best way to reach others. Chan Master Dadian, for instance, taught Han Yu by sitting still. Even the attendant said but a few words. Yet they were able to indirectly allude to a very deep and profound teaching. The once arrogant Han Yu was so moved by this revelation that

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

Dadian was a student of Chan Master Shitou Xiqian, whose preserved body is still kept at a temple in Japan today. Shitou led a very interesting life. His enlightenment is another example of the method of indirect speech. When Shitou was twelve, he happened upon the Sixth Patriarch at Caoxi. The Sixth Patriarch immediately took a liking to him, and asked that Shitou become his student. Deeply honored, Shitou became a student of the Sixth Patriarch at the tender age of twelve.

Unfortunately, the Sixth Patriarch passed away three short years later. Shitou was just fifteen. But before the Sixth Patriarch passed away, Shitou asked for teachings. The Sixth Patriarch said to him, “Go to Xingsi.”

In Chinese, the name Xingsi sounds very close to *xuansi*, “to contemplate.” Thus, it was no surprise that Shitou misunderstood the dying words of the Sixth Patriarch. He meditated every day. Fortunately, an elder monk learned of the situation and said to Shitou, “You are mistaken. Your teacher told you to go to your Dharma brother Xingsi. He is teaching the Dharma in the hills of Qingyuan; you should go there to pay him a visit.”

Now that Shitou 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 traveled to Caoxi. There was nothing there for him to attain.

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

Shitou explained, “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 Buddha nature. This is yet another example of using indirect speech.

We have touched on a few Chan methods of teaching: questioning and counter-questioning, opposing answers, and indirect speech. There are many other methods, but in this limited space I cannot introduce them all. 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 majestic mountain range of Lushan and was written before Su Dongpo studied Chan:

It's a mountain range when viewed
 horizontally, a peak vertically;
Near, far, high, or low—
 how its appearance varies.
One cannot know the true nature
 of Mount Lu;
For one is on that very mountain itself.

After Su Dongpo began to learn of Chan, he wrote another poem:

Misty rain over Mount Lu and
 the waves of Zhejiang,
Missing out on such marvels brings a
 thousand unbearable regrets;
But upon actually seeing them,
 there is nothing really there:
Just misty rain over Mount Lu and
 the waves of Zhejiang.

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

The sounds of the rippling creek are all
words of the Buddha;
The mountain scene is none other than the
body of the Dharma.
Night falls, and one contemplates
eighty-four thousand verses,
Just how will I tell others these truths at
some later time?

Now that you have had a glimpse of the wondrous teachings of the Chan School of Buddhism, the rest is 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 realized by oneself in one's daily life.

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