Chinese Buddhism

Tiantai Buddhism

A selection from

The Lotus Sutra
(Saddharmapūraṇa-Sūtra)
(Sūtra on the Lotus of the True Dharma)

[Certainly one of the most important and revered scriptures in all of East Asia, the Lotus Sūtra is most famous for its doctrine of ekāyāna, the “One Vehicle,” which became the distinctive teaching of the Tiantai School of Buddhism as it developed in China (Tendai in Japan). Bewildered by the wide diversity of Indian Buddhist scriptures, and attempting to reconcile the seeming contradictions in the Buddha’s Dharma that arose as a result of the three vehicles of Indian Buddhism, the Hinayāna, Mahāyāna, and Vajrayāna, the teachers of the Tiantai emphasized that there is really only one vehicle as taught in the Lotus Sūtra. While on the lower levels of knowledge and truth there are different vehicles and different paths, on the highest third level of knowledge and truth there is only one path, one vehicle. All the various teachings found in the different scriptures are merely strategies, or ‘expedient means’ (upāya), by which the Buddha adapted his teachings to suit the needs of particular individuals in their own particular situation. This notion of ‘skill-in-means’ emphasized in the Lotus Sūtra is one of the key concepts of Mahāyāna Buddhism.

In Chapter Five the famous parable of the medicinal herbs is used to explain the notion of ‘expedient means’ (upāya). Just as there are many different medicinal herbs from a multitude of different plants to treat all the various sicknesses of human beings, the Buddha’s teachings, or Dharma, takes many forms to treat each individual according to his or her needs.]

The Parable of the Medicinal Herbs

At that time the World-Honored One said to Mahakasyapa and the other major disciples: "Excellent, excellent, Kashyapa. You have given an excellent description of the true blessings of the Thus Come One. It is just as you have said. The Thus Come One indeed has immeasurable, boundless, asamkhyas of blessings, and though you and the others were to spend immeasurable millions of kalpas in the effort, you could never finish describing them.
"Kashyapa, you should understand this. The Thus Come One is king of the doctrines. In what he preaches, there is nothing that is vain. With regard to all the various doctrines, he employs wisdom as an expedient means (upāya) in expounding them. Therefore the doctrines that he expounds all extends to the point where there is comprehensive wisdom. The Thus Come One observes and understands the end to which all doctrines tend. And he also understands the workings of the deepest mind of all living beings, penetrating them completely and without hindrance. And with regard to the doctrines he is thoroughly enlightened, and he reveals to living beings the totality of wisdom.

"Kashyapa, it is like the plants and trees, thickets and groves, and the medicinal herbs, widely ranging in variety, each with its own name and hue, that grow in the hills and streams, the valleys and different soils of the thousand-millionfold world. Dense clouds spread over them, covering the entire thousand-millionfold world and in one moment saturating it all. The moisture penetrates to all the plants, trees, thickets and groves, and medicinal herbs equally, to their big roots, big stems, big limbs and big leaves. Each of the trees, big and small, depending upon whether it is superior, middling or inferior in nature, receives its allotment. The rain falling from one blanket of clouds accords with each particular species and nature, causing it to sprout and mature, to blossom and bear fruit. Though all these plants and trees grow in the same earth and moistened by the same rain, each has its differences and particulars.

"Kashyapa, you should understand that the Thus Come One is like this. He appears in the world like a great cloud rising up. With a loud voice he penetrates to all the heavenly and human beings and the asuras of the entire world, like a great cloud spreading over the thousand-millionfold lands. And in the midst of the great assembly, he addresses these words, saying: "I am the Thus Come One, worthy of offerings, of right and universal knowledge, perfect clarity and conduct, well gone, understanding the world, unexcelled worthy, trainer of people, teacher of heavenly and human beings, Buddha, World-Honored One. Those who have not yet crossed over I will cause to cross over, those not yet freed I will free, those not yet at rest I will put to rest, those not yet in nirvana I will cause to attain nirvana. Of this existence and future existences I understand the true circumstances. I am one who knows all things, sees all things, understands the way, opens up the way, preaches the way. You heavenly and human beings, asuras and others, you must all come here so that I may let you hear the Dharma!"

"At that time living beings of countless thousands, ten thousands, millions of species come to the place where the Buddha is, to listen to the Dharma. The Thus Come One then observes whether they are diligent in their efforts or lazy. And in accordance with each is capable of hearing, he preaches the Law for them in an immeasurable variety of ways so that all of them are delighted and are able to gain excellent benefits there-from.

"Once these living beings have heard the Law, they will enjoy peace and security in their present existence and good circumstances in future existences, when they will receive joy through the way and again be able to hear the Law. And having heard the Law, they will escape from obstacles and hindrances, and with regard to the various doctrines will be able to exercise their powers to the fullest, so that gradually they can enter into the way. It is like the rain falling from that great cloud upon all the plants and trees, thickets and groves, and medicinal herbs. Each, depending upon its species and nature, receives its full share of moistening and is enabled to sprout and grow.

"The Law preached by the Thus Come One is of one form, one flavor, namely, the form of emancipation, the form of separation, the form of extinction, which in the end comes down to a wisdom embracing all species. When the living beings hear the law of the Thus Come One, though they may embrace, read and recite it, and practice it as it dictates, they themselves do not realize or understand the blessings they are gaining thereby. Why is this? Because only the Thus Come One understands the species, the form, the substance, the nature of these living beings, he knows what things they dwell on, what things they ponder, that things they practice. He knows what Law they dwell on, what Law they ponder, what Law they practice, through what Law they attain what Law.

"Living beings exist in a variety of environments, but only the Thus Come One sees the true circumstances and fully understands them without hindrance. It is like those plants and trees, thickets and groves, and medicinal herbs which do not themselves know whether they are superior, middling or inferior in nature. But the Thus Come One knows that this is the Law of one form, one flavor, namely, the form of emancipation, the form of separation, the form of extinction, the form of ultimate nirvana, of constant tranquility and emptiness. The Buddha understands all this. But because he can see the
desires that are in the minds of living beings, he guides and protects them, and for this reason does not immediately preach to them the wisdom that embraces all species.

“You and the others, Kashyapa, have done a very rare thing, for you can understand how the Thus Come One preaches the Law in accordance with what is appropriate, you can have faith in it, you can accept it. Why do I say this? Because the fact that the Buddhas, the World-Honored Ones, preach the Law in accordance with what is appropriate is hard to comprehend, hard to understand.”

At that time the World-Honored One, wishing to state his meaning once more, spoke in verse form, saying:

The Dharma King, destroyer of being, when he appears in the world accords with the desires of living beings, preaching the Law in a variety of ways. The Thus Come One, worthy of honor and reverence, is profound and far-reaching in wisdom. For long he remained silent regarding the essential, in no hurry to speak at once. If those who are wise hear of it they can believe and understand it, but those without wisdom will have doubts and regrets and for all time will remain in error. For this reason, Kashyapa, he adjusts to the person to gain a correct view. Kashyapa, you should understand that it is like a great cloud that rises up in the world and covers it all over.

This beneficent cloud is laden with moisture, the lightening gleams and flashes, and the sound of thunder reverberates afar, causing the multitude to rejoice. The sun’s rays are veiled and hidden, a clear coolness comes over the land; masses of darkness descend and spread—you can almost touch them. The rain falls everywhere, coming down on all four sides, its flow and saturation are measureless, reaching to every area of the earth, to the ravines and valleys of the mountains and streams, to the remote and secluded places where grow plants, bushes, medicinal herbs, trees large and small, a hundred grains, rice seedlings, sugar cane, grape vines. The rain moistens them all, none ails to receive its full share, the parched ground is everywhere watered, herbs and trees alike grow lush. What falls from the cloud is water of a single flavor, but the plants and trees, thickets and groves, each accept the moisture that is appropriate to its portion. All the various trees, whether superior, middling or inferior, take that is fitting for large or small and each is enabled to sprout and grow. Root, stem, limb, leaf, the glow and hue of flower and fruit—one rain extends to them and all are able to become fresh and glossy, whether their allotment of substance, form and nature is large or small, the moistening they receive is one, but each grows and flourishes in its own way.

The Buddha is like this when he appears in the world, comparable to a great cloud that covers all things everywhere, Having appeared in the world, for the sake of living beings he makes distinctions in expounding the truth regarding phenomena. The great sage, the World-Honored One, to heavenly and human beings, in the midst of all beings, pronounces these words: I am the Thus Come One, most honored of two-legged beings. I appear in the world like a great cloud that showers moisture upon all the dry and withered living beings, so that all are able to escape suffering, gain the joy of peace and security, the joys of this world and the joy of nirvana.

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Huayan Buddhism

A selection from the
The Flower Garland Sutra
(Avatamsaka Sutra)

[The Flower Garland Sutra is most known for the notion of the mutual interrelationship of all things which is the distinctive teaching of the Huayan school of Chinese Buddhism. The teaching is expressed through the metaphor of jeweled net of Indra: “Far away in the heavenly abode of the great god Indra, there is a wonderful net that has been hung by some cunning artificer in such a manner that it stretches out infinitely in all directions. In accordance with the extravagant tastes of deities, the artificer has hung a single glittering jewel in each ‘eye’ of the net, and since the net itself is infinite in all dimensions, the jewels are infinite in number. There hang the jewels, glittering like stars of the first magnitude, a wonderful sight to behold. If we now arbitrarily select one of these jewels for inspection and look closely at it, we will discover that in its polished surface there are reflected all the other jewels in the net, infinite in number. Not only that, but each of the jewels reflected in this one jewel is also reflecting all the other jewels, so that there is an infinite reflecting process occurring.” The sutra opens with a description of the Buddha’s site of enlightenment as consisting of a net of jewels, exquisitely scented by garlands of flowers.]

Book 1

The Wonderful Adornments of the Leaders of the Worlds

THUS HAVE I HEARD. At one time the Buddha was in the land of Magadha, in a state of purity, at the site of enlightenment, having just realized true awareness. The ground was solid and firm, made of diamond, adorned with exquisite jewel discs and myriad precious flowers, with pure dear crystals. The ocean of characteristics of the various colors appeared over an infinite extent; There were banners of precious stones, constantly emitting shining light and producing beautiful sounds. Nets of myriad gems and garlands of exquisitely scented flowers hung all around. The finest jewels appeared spontaneously, raining inexhaustible quantities of gems and beautiful flowers all over the earth. There were rows

there rained precious stones, and within each gem were
enlightening beings, in great hosts like clouds,
simultaneously appearing.

Also, by virtue of the awesome spiritual power of the
Buddha, the tree of enlightenment constantly gave forth
sublime sounds speaking various truths without end.

The palace chamber in which the Buddha was situated
was spacious and beautifully adorned. It extended
throughout the ten directions. It was made of jewels of
various colors and was decorated with all kinds of
precious flowers. The various adornments emanated
lights like clouds; the masses of their reflections from
within the palace formed banners.

A boundless host of enlightening beings (bodhisattvas),
the congregation at the site of enlightenment, were all
gathered there: by means of the ability to manifest the
lights and inconceivable sounds of the Buddhas, they
fashioned nets of the finest jewels, from which came forth
all the realms of action of the spiritual powers of the
Buddhas, and in which were reflected images of the
abodes of all beings.

Also, by virtue of the aid of the spiritual power of the
Buddha, they embraced the entire cosmos in a single
thought.

Their lion seats were high, wide, and beautiful. The
bases were made of jewels, their nets of lotus blossoms,
their tableaus of pure, exquisite gemstones. They were
adorned with various flowers of all colors. Their roofs,
chambers, steps, and doors were adorned by the images
of all things. The branches and fruits of jewel trees
surrounded them, arrayed at intervals.

Clouds of radiance of jewels reflected each other: the
Buddhas of the ten directions conjured regal pearls, and
the exquisite jewels in the topknots of all the enlightening
beings all emanated light, which came and illuminated
them.

Furthermore, sustained by the spiritual power of all
Buddhas, they expounded the vast perspective of the
Enlightened Ones, their subtle tones extending afar, there
being no place they did not reach.

At that time, the Buddha, the World Honored One, in
this setting, attained to supreme, correct awareness of all
things. His knowledge entered into all times with
complete equanimity; his body filled all worlds; his voice
universally accorded with all lands in the ten directions.

Like space, which contains all forms, he made no
discrimination among all objects. And, as space extends
everywhere, he entered all lands with equanimity. His
body forever sat omnipresent in all sites of
enlightenment. Among the host of enlightening beings,
his awesome light shone clearly, like the sun emerging,
iluminating the world. The ocean of myriad virtues which
he practiced in all times was thoroughly pure, and he
constantly demonstrated the production of all the
buddha-lands, their boundless forms and spheres of light
extending throughout the entire cosmos, equally and
impartially.

He expounded all truths, like spreading great clouds.
Each of his hairtips was able to contain all worlds without
interference, in each manifesting immeasurable spiritual
powers, teaching and civilizing all sentient beings. His
body extended throughout the ten directions, yet without
coming or going. His knowledge entered into all forms
and realized the emptiness of things. All the miraculous
displays of the Buddhas of past, present, and future, were
all seen in his light, and all the adornments of
inconceivable eons were revealed. . . .

[What follows is a long series of discourses by various
bodhisattvas describing the Buddhas and all their miraculous
displays. Now towards the end of the book the central metaphor
of the text, the net of jewels, returns in the following discourse.]

Then the great enlightening being Bold Intelligence of
the Sun of Knowledge, empowered by the Buddha,
looked over all the multitudes assembled on the scene
and said in verse,

Buddha sits in the hall of truth with steady gaze,
Brilliantly lighting up the palace.
In accordance with the dispositions of all beings
His body appears throughout all lands.

The Buddha’s palace is beyond conception,
Adorned with stores of precious jewels,
Each decoration shining with light;
Sitting there, the Buddha is most conspicuous of all.

With pillars of jewels of various hues,
Chimes of real gold hanging like clouds,
Jewel stairways in rows on four sides,
The gates open in every direction.

Arrays of banners of flowery silk,
Jewel trees with decorated branches and boughs,
Garlands of pearls draped on all sides;
The Ocean of Wisdom sits calmly therein.
Nets of jewels, exquisite fragrant banners,  
Brilliant lamps hung like clouds;  
Covered with various decorations,  
The world-transcending true knower sits within.

Everywhere he manifests clouds of mystic displays,  
Those clouds teaching throughout the world,  
Harmonizing and calming down all sentient beings:  
All this appears from the Buddha's palace.

Trees of gems bloom with fine flowers  
Having no peer in all the world;  
The embellishments of the lands of all times  
Reveal their reflections therein.

Everywhere there are heaps of jewels;  
Their light blazes in countless hues.  
Gates and doors open at intervals all around;  
The beams and ceiling are especially beautiful.

The Buddha's palace is inconceivable;  
Its pure radiance contains every form—

In it appear all palaces  
A Buddha sitting in each,

The Buddha's palace is boundless;  
The Naturally Awakened One abides therein.  
All the masses from all ten directions  
Come gather around the Buddha.

With a mind directed to all buddhas,  
By the power of the vow of the practice of good.

In a single atom, buddhas as many as atoms  
Sit in the midst of enlightening beings;  
So it is of all things in the cosmos  
I realize all are filled with buddhas. [. . .]

May the buddhas of the past be honored,  
As well as those now in the worlds of the ten directions,  
And may those of the future be at ease,  
Filled with joy, having realized enlightenment.

May all the lands of the ten directions  
Be purified, supreme, and filled  
With buddhas and enlightening beings  
At the tree of enlightenment.

May all beings in the ten directions  
Be happy and well;  
May all beings' righteous aim be successful,  
May their hope be realized. [. . .]

May I see the inconceivable buddhas sitting among enlightening beings  
In the lands as numerous as atoms  
That are in each atom. [. . .]

*     *     *


*Then the great enlightening being (bodhisattva) Universally Good, thus explaining courses of eons, as many eons as atoms in the untold buddha-lands in the succession of worlds, went on to make a vow:

As many buddhas as there may be in any world  
Throughout the ten directions, throughout past, present,  
and future,  
I honor them all, without exception,  
Pure in body, speech, and mind.

With as many bodies as atoms in all lands  
I bow to all buddhas,
Pure Land Buddhism

The Land of Bliss Sutra
(The Sukhāvatīvyūha Sūtra)
The Shorter Discourse
otherwise known as
The Sutra of Amita Buddha

A translation of Kumarajiva's Chinese Version
(the Amito-jīng)

Preamble: The Setting and the Audience
§1. This I have heard. At one time, the Buddha was staying in the royal capital city of Sravasti, in Prince Jeta's grove. He was staying in the cloistered park that the generous Anathapindada gave to the Buddhist Order in Prince Jeta's grove.

§2. At that time the Buddha was surrounded by a large assembly of monks—one thousand two hundred fifty of them. These monks were all great arhats, highly respected among the people for their holiness.

§3. Among them were the elders Shariputra and Maha-Maudgalyayana, and Maha-Kasyapa, Maha-Katayana, Maha-Kausithila, Revata, Chula-Panthaka, Nanda, Ananda, Rahula, Gavampati, Pindola Bharadvaja, Kalodayin, Maha-Kapphina, Vakkula, Anuruddha—and other great disciples like these.

§4. And he was also accompanied by an assembly of bodhisattvas mahasattvas; present were the bodhisattva Manjushri, the Prince of Dharma, as well as the future Buddha, the bodhisattva Maitreya, also known as Bodhisattva Ajita. The bodhisattva Gandhahastin, and
the bodhisattva Nityodyukta were also there, with other great bodhisattvas like these.

§5. And the Buddha was likewise accompanied by a large crowd of countless gods, Shakra, known as Indra, the King of the gods, and many others.

The Main Discourse

The Land of Supreme Bliss

§6. Then, the Buddha spoke to the Venerable Shariputra: “West of here, a hundred billion buddha-fields away, there is a world system called ‘Supreme Bliss.’ In that field there is a buddha named ‘Amita.’ At this very moment he dwells in that faraway land, preaching the Dharma.

§7. “Shariputra, why is that field called ‘Supreme Bliss’? Because the living beings in that realm are free from all forms of suffering and they only experience all forms of happiness. Therefore, it is called ‘Supreme Bliss.’

§8. “Furthermore, Shariputra, all around this Land of Supreme Bliss, there are seven tiers of railings, seven rows of netting, and seven rows of trees. They are all made of the four precious substances. All around, they encircle the perimeter of this land. Therefore, that land is called ‘Supreme Bliss.’

§9. “Furthermore, Shariputra, in the Land of Supreme Bliss, there are bathing pools made of the seven precious substances. They are filled with the best water, endowed with eight good qualities: their water is always limpid, cool, sweet-tasting, light, soft, placid, healthy, and thirst-quenching. The bottom of these pools is completely covered with golden sand. In each of their four sides, they have steps made of gold, silver, lapis-lazuli, and crystal.

“Above, there are towered pavilions, adorned with gold, silver, lapis-lazuli, crystal, coral, red pearls, and agate. On the surface of the pools, there are lotus blossoms as large as cart wheels. These are blue colored, with a blue sheen; yellow colored, with a yellow sheen; red colored, with a red sheen; white colored, with a white sheen; they are delicate and fragrant.

“Shariputra, in the Land of Supreme Bliss, good qualities and ornaments like these are brought to perfection.

§10. “Furthermore, Shariputra, in this buddha-field celestial music is constantly heard. And the ground is made of gold. Four times a day, exactly on the hour, day and night, mandara flowers rain down from heaven. Early every morning, each living being in this land picks some of those exquisite flowers, places them in the hem of his robe, and travels to worship with these flowers a hundred billion buddhas in other worlds in the other regions of the universe. Immediately thereafter, each of these persons returns, in time for his forenoon meal, to this, his own world, and takes his meal and afternoon stroll.

“Shariputra, in the Land of Supreme Bliss, good qualities and ornaments like these are brought to perfection.

§11. “Moreover, Shariputra, in that land you will always see many flocks of rare and exquisite birds of many colors—white egrets, peacocks, parrots, shari and kalavinka birds, and those birds called ‘Living-Together.’ Droves of these birds gather to sing with soothing, exquisite voices four times a day, exactly on the hour, day and night. Their voices proclaim the tenets of the Buddha’s teaching—for instance, they sing of the five spiritual faculties, of the five spiritual powers, of the seven aspects of awakening, of the Eightfold Path that is followed by those of spiritual nobility, and of many other aspects of the Buddha’s Dharma. When the living beings in that buddha-field hear such song, they all immediately enjoy thoughts of the Buddha, of his Dharma, and of his Order, and keep these three in mind incessantly.

§12. “Shariputra, you should not say that these birds are actually born here as a result of their past evil deeds. Why not? Because the three undesirable courses of rebirth are not found in this buddhafield. Moreover, Shariputra, in this buddha-land even the names of the three undesirable paths of rebirth are not to be found. How then could they exist in fact? The birds that sing in this buddhafield have all been created by the Buddha Amita himself, by means of his miraculous power, because he wanted to have them broadcast the sound of the Dharma.

§13. “Shariputra, in that buddha-land, a subtle breeze blows, swaying the rows of jeweled trees and the jeweled nets, so that they emit an exquisite sound, like that of hundreds of thousands of diverse kinds of
musical instruments playing together at the same time. All those who hear this sound enjoy spontaneously and immediately thoughts of the Buddha, of his Dharma, and of his Order, and keep these three in mind incessantly, bringing to mind the Buddha, bringing to mind his Dharma, bringing to mind his Order.

“Shariputra, in that buddha-land, good qualities and ornaments like these are brought to perfection.

The Buddha Presiding Over the Land of Supreme Bliss

§14. “What do you think, Shariputra? Why is this Buddha called ‘Amita’—‘measureless’? Shariputra, this Buddha’s beaming light is measureless. It shines without obstruction into buddha-fields in the ten directions. Therefore, he is called ‘Amita.’

§15. “Furthermore, Shariputra, this Buddha’s life-span, and the life-span of the human beings in his buddha-field as well, has a duration of measureless, boundless, countless, cosmic ages. For this reason too he is called ‘measureless,’ Amita.’

“Shariputra, ten cosmic ages have now passed since the Buddha Amita attained buddhahood.

The Inhabitants of the Land of Supreme Bliss

§16. “Furthermore, Shariputra, this Buddha has measureless, inestimable numbers of disciples that are auditors, all of them arhats. Their number cannot be grasped. The same is true also of the community of bodhisattvas in that land.

“Shariputra, in that buddha-land, good qualities and ornaments like these are brought to perfection.

§17. “Furthermore, Shariputra, all living beings born in the Land of Supreme Bliss will progress irreversibly in the path. Many among them are only one more birth away from the full awakening of a buddha. Their numbers are vast. Their numbers cannot be grasped. One can only speak of their spiritual careers in terms of measureless, boundless, incalculable, cosmic ages.

Exhortation

§18. “Shariputra, living beings who hear this should generate an earnest desire, wishing to be reborn in that land. Why? Because in that land one will be able to meet in one place persons of such high virtue as the many living beings I have described here. Shariputra, one cannot be reborn in that buddha-field, if one depends on the merit of only a few roots of goodness.

§19. “Shariputra, if good men or good women hear this explanation of the qualities of the Buddha Amita, and embrace his name, and keep it in mind single-mindedly and without distraction, be it for one day, or for two, for three, for four, for five, for six, or for seven days, then, when their lives come to an end, the Buddha Amita, together with his holy entourage, will appear before them. At the time of their death, their minds free of any distorted views, they will be able to be reborn forthwith in Amita Buddha’s Land of Supreme Bliss.

§20. “Shariputra, I have seen the benefit of this. Therefore, I say this to you: A living being who hears this discourse should aspire to be reborn in that land.

Coda

31. As the Buddha finished delivering this discourse, Shariputra, with all the monks, and the gods, humans, asuras, and all the other living beings in the whole world, having heard these words of the Buddha, rejoiced with his words and accepted them with faith. They then paid homage to the Buddha, and went their way.

EVERYTHING that appears in the three realms comes from the mind. Hence buddhas of the past and future teach mind to mind without bothering about definitions!

But if they don’t define it, what do they mean by mind?

You ask. That’s your mind. I answer. That’s my mind. If I had no mind, how could I answer? If you had no mind, how could you ask? That which asks is your mind. Through endless kalpas without beginning, whatever you do, wherever you are, that’s your real mind, that’s your real buddha. This mind is the buddha says the same thing. Beyond this mind you’ll never find another buddha. To search for enlightenment or nirvana beyond this mind is impossible. The reality of your own self-nature, the absence of cause and effect, is what’s meant by mind. Your mind is nirvana.

You might think you can find a buddha or enlightenment somewhere beyond the mind, but such a place doesn’t exist. Trying to find a buddha or enlightenment is like trying to grab space. Space has a name but no form. It’s not something you can pick up or put down. And you certainly can’t grab it. Beyond this mind you’ll never see a buddha. The buddha is a product of your mind. Why look for a buddha beyond this mind?

Buddhas of the past and future only talk about this mind. The mind is the buddha, and the buddha is the mind. Beyond the mind there’s no buddha, and beyond the buddha there’s no mind. If you think there’s a buddha beyond the mind, where is he? There’s no buddha beyond the mind, so why envision one? You can’t know your real mind as long as you deceive yourself. As long as you’re enthralled by a lifeless form, you’re not free. If you don’t believe me, deceiving yourself won’t help. It’s not the buddha’s fault. People, though, are deluded. They’re unaware that their own mind is the buddha. Otherwise they wouldn’t look for a buddha outside the mind.

Buddhas don’t save buddhas. If you use your mind to look for a buddha, you won’t see the buddha. As long as you look for a buddha somewhere else, you’ll never see that your own mind is the buddha. Don’t use a buddha to worship a buddha. And don’t use the mind to invoke a buddha. Buddhas don’t recite sutras. Buddhas don’t keep precepts. And buddhas don’t break precepts. Buddhas don’t keep or break anything. Buddhas don’t do good or evil.
To find a buddha, you have to see your nature. Whoever sees his nature is a buddha. If you don't see your nature, invoking buddhas, reciting sutras, making offerings, and keeping precepts are all useless. Invoking buddhas results in good karma, reciting sutras results in a good memory; keeping precepts results in a good rebirth, and making offerings results in future blessings—but no buddha.

If you don't understand by yourself, you'll have to find a teacher to get to the bottom of life and death. But unless he sees his nature, such a person isn't a teacher. Even if he can recite the Twelvefold Canon, he can't escape the Wheel of Birth and Death. He suffers in the three realms without hope of release.

Long ago, the monk Good Star was able to recite the entire Canon. But he didn't escape the Wheel, because he didn't see his nature. If this was the case with Good Star, then people nowadays who recite a few sutras or shastras and think it's the Dharma are fools. Unless you see your mind, reciting so much prose is useless.

To find a buddha all you have to do is see your nature. Your nature is the buddha. And the buddha is the person who's free: free of plans, free of cares. If you don't see your nature and run around all day looking somewhere else, you'll never find a buddha. The truth is, there's nothing to find. But to reach such an understanding you need a teacher and you need to struggle to make yourself understand. Life and death are important. Don't suffer them in vain. There's no advantage in deceiving yourself. Even if you have mountains of jewels and as many servants as there are grains of sand along the Ganges, you see them when your eyes are open. But what about when your eyes are shut? You should realize then that everything you see is like a dream or illusion.

If you don't find a teacher soon, you'll live this life in vain. It's true, you have the buddha-nature. But without the help of a teacher you'll never know it. Only one person in a million becomes enlightened without a teacher's help.

If, though, by the conjunction of conditions, someone understands what the Buddha meant, that person doesn't need a teacher. Such a person has a natural awareness superior to anything taught. But unless you're so blessed, study hard, and by means of instruction you'll understand.

People who don't understand and think they can do so without study are no different from those deluded souls who can't tell white from black. Falsey proclaiming the Buddhadharma, such persons in fact blaspheme the Buddha and subvert the Dharma. They preach as if they were bringing rain. But theirs is the preaching of devils, not of buddhas. Their teacher is the King of Devils and their disciples are the Devil's minions. Deluded people who follow such instruction unwittingly sink deeper in the Sea of Birth and Death.

Unless they see their nature, how can people call themselves buddhas? They're liars who deceive others into entering the realm of devils. Unless they see their nature, their preaching of the Twelvefold Canon is nothing but the preaching of devils. Their allegiance is to Mara, not to the Buddha. Unable to distinguish white from black, how can they escape birth and death?

Whoever sees his nature is a buddha; whoever doesn't is a mortal. But if you can find your buddha-nature apart from your mortal nature, where is it? Our mortal nature is our buddha-nature. Beyond this nature there's no buddha. The buddha is our nature. There's no buddha besides this nature. And there's no nature besides the buddha.

But suppose I don't see my nature, can't I still attain enlightenment by invoking buddhas, reciting sutras, making offerings, observing precepts, practicing devotions, or doing good works?

No, you can't.

Why not?

If you attain anything at all, it's conditional, it's karmic. It results in retribution. It turns the Wheel. And as long as you're subject to birth and death, you'll never attain enlightenment. To attain enlightenment you have to see your nature. Unless you see your nature, all this talk about cause and effect is nonsense. Buddhas don't practice nonsense. A buddha is free of karma, free of cause and effect. To say he attains anything at all is to slander a buddha. What could he possibly attain? Even focusing on a mind, a power, an understanding, or a view is impossible for a buddha. A buddha isn't one-sided. The nature of his mind is basically empty (wu), neither pure nor impure. He's free of practice and realization. He's free of cause and effect.

A buddha doesn't observe precepts. A buddha doesn't do good or evil. A buddha isn't energetic or lazy. A buddha is someone who does nothing, someone who can't even focus his mind on a buddha. A buddha isn't a buddha. Don't think about buddhas. If you don't see what I'm talking about, you'll never know your own mind.
People who don’t see their nature and imagine they can practice thoughtlessness all the time are liars and fools. They fall into endless space. They’re like drunks. They can’t tell good from evil. If you intend to cultivate such a practice, you have to see your nature before you can put an end to rational thought. To attain enlightenment without seeing your nature is impossible.

Still others commit all sorts of evil deeds, claiming karma doesn’t exist. They erroneously maintain that since everything is empty (wu), committing evil isn’t wrong. Such persons fall into a hell of endless darkness with no hope of release. Those who are wise hold no such conception.

But if our every movement or state, whenever it occurs, is the mind, why don’t we see this mind when a person’s body dies?

The mind is always present. You just don’t see it.

But if the mind is present, why don’t I see it?

Do you ever dream?

Of course.

When you dream, is that you?

Yes, it’s me.

And is what you’re doing and saying different from you?

No, it isn’t.

But if it isn’t, then this body is your real body. And this real body is your mind. And this mind, through endless kalpas without beginning, has never varied. It has never lived or died, appeared, or disappeared, increased or decreased. It’s not pure or impure, good or evil, past or future. It’s not true or false. It’s not male or female. It doesn’t appear as a monk or a layman, an elder or a novice, a sage or a fool, a buddha or a mortal. It strives for no realization and suffers no karma. It has no strength or form. It’s like space. You can’t possess it and you can’t lose it. Its movements can’t be blocked by mountains, rivers, or rock walls. Its unstoppable powers penetrate the Mountain of Five Skandhas and cross the River of Samsara. No karma can restrain this real body. But this mind is subtle and hard to see. It’s not the same as the sensual mind. Everyone wants to see this mind, and those who move their hands and feet by its light are as many as the grains of sand along the Ganges, but when you ask them, they can’t explain it. They’re like puppets. It’s theirs to use. Why don’t they see it?

The Buddha said people are deluded. This is why when they act they fall into the River of Endless Rebirth. And when they try to get out, they only sink deeper. And all because they don’t see their nature. If people weren’t deluded, why would they ask about something right in front of them? Not one of them understands the movement of his own hands and feet. The Buddha wasn’t mistaken. Deluded people don’t know who they are. Something so hard to fathom is known by a buddha and no one else. Only the wise know this mind, this mind called dharma-nature, this mind called liberation. Neither life nor death can restrain this mind. Nothing can. It’s also called the Unstoppable Tathagata, the Incomprehensible, the Sacred Self, the Immortal, the Great Sage. Its names vary but not its essence. Buddhas vary too, but none leaves his own mind.

The mind’s capacity is limitless, and its manifestations are inexhaustible. Seeing forms with your eyes, hearing sounds with your ears, smelling odors with your nose, tasting flavors with your tongue, every movement or state is all your mind. At every moment, where language can’t go, that’s your mind.

The sutras say, “A tathagata’s forms are endless. And so is his awareness.” The endless variety of forms is due to the mind. Its ability to distinguish things, whatever their movement or state, is the mind’s awareness. But the mind has no form and its awareness no limit. Hence it’s said, “A tathagata’s forms are endless. And so is his awareness.”

A material body of the four elements is trouble. A material body is subject to birth and death. But the real body exists without existing, because a tathagata’s real body never changes. The sutras say, “People should realize that the buddha-nature is something they have always had.” Kashyapa only realized his own nature.

Our nature is the mind. And the mind is our nature. This nature is the same as the mind of all buddhas. Buddhas of the past and future only transmit this mind. Beyond this mind there’s no buddha anywhere. But deluded people don’t realize that their own mind is the buddha. They keep searching outside. They never stop invoking buddhas or worshipping buddhas and wondering Where is the buddha? Don’t indulge in such illusions. Just know your mind. Beyond your mind there’s no other buddha. The sutras say, “Everything that has form is an illusion.” They also say, “Wherever you are, there’s a buddha.” Your mind is the buddha. Don’t use a buddha to worship a buddha.

Even if a buddha or bodhisattva should suddenly appear before you, there’s no need for reverence. This
The Platform Sutra

This first part of The Platform Sutra recounts the story of how Hui-neng became the Sixth Patriarch of Chan Buddhism. Hui-neng, who is depicted as an illiterate, manual laborer from a barbarian village, ends up being the one who earns the Ancestor’s robe and bowl (the sign of the Patriarch) in demonstrating the perfection of wisdom (prajñāpāramitā) in his verse brilliantly expressing śānyātā, the fundamental emptiness of all things.

Once, when the Patriarch had arrived at Pao-un Monastery, Prefect Wei of Shao-chou and other officials went there to ask him to deliver public lectures on Buddhism in the hall of Ta-fan temple in the city [Canton].

In due course, there were assembled [in the lecture hall] Prefect Wei, government officials, and Confucian scholars, about thirty each, and bhikshus, bhikshunis, Taoists, and laymen to the number of about one thousand. After the patriarch had taken his seat, the congregation in a body paid him homage and asked him to preach on the fundamental laws of Buddhism, whereupon His Holiness delivered the following address:

Learned Audience, our essence of mind [literally, self-nature], which is the seed or kernel of enlightenment [bodhi], is pure by nature, and by making use of this mind alone we can reach buddhahood directly. Now let me tell you something about my own life and how I came into possession of the esoteric teaching of the Dhyana [Ch’An] school.

My father, a native of Fan-yang, was dismissed from his official post and banished to be a commoner in Hsin-chou in Kwangtung. I was unlucky in that my father died when I was very young, leaving my mother poor and miserable. We moved to Kuang-chou [Canton] and were then in very bad circumstances.

I was selling firewood in the market one day, when one of my customers ordered some to be brought to his shop. Upon delivery being made and payment received, I left the shop, outside of which I found a man reciting a sutra. As soon as I heard the text of this sutra my mind at once became enlightened. Thereupon I asked the man the name of the book he was reciting and was told that it was the Diamond Sutra. I further inquired whence he came and why he recited this particular sutra. He replied that he came from Tung-
shan monastery in the Huang-mei district of Ch‘i-chou; that the abbot in charge of this temple was Hung-jen, the fifth patriarch; that there were about one thousand disciples under him; and that when he went there to pay homage to the patriarch, he attended lectures on this sutra. He further told me that His Holiness used to encourage the laity as well as the monks to recite this scripture, as by doing so they might realize their own essence of mind, and thereby reach buddhahood directly.

It must be due to my good karma in past lives that I heard about this, and that I was given ten taels for the maintenance of my mother by a man who advised me to go to Huang-mei to interview the fifth patriarch. After arrangements had been made for her, I left for Huang-mei, which took me less than thirty days to reach.

I then went to pay homage to the patriarch, and was asked where I came from and what I expected to get from him. I replied, "I am a commoner from Hsin-chou of Kwangtung. I have traveled far to pay you respect and I ask for nothing but buddhahood."

"You are a native of Kwangtung, a barbarian? How can you expect to be a buddha?"

I replied: "Although there are northern men and southern men, north and south make no difference to their buddhanature. A barbarian is different from Your Holiness 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 stop short. He then ordered me to join the crowd to work.

"May I tell Your Holiness," said I, "that prajna [transcendental wisdom] often rises in my mind. When one does not go astray from one’s own essence of mind, one may be called the ‘field of merits.’ I do not know what work Your Holiness would ask me to do."

"This barbarian is too-bright," he remarked. "Go to the stable and speak no more." I then withdrew myself to the backyard and was told by a lay brother to split firewood and to pound rice.

More than eight months after, the patriarch saw me one day and said, "I know your knowledge of Buddhism is very sound, but I have to refrain from speaking to you lest evildoers should do you harm. Do you understand?"

"Yes, sir, I do," I replied: "To avoid people taking notice of me, I dare not go near your hall."

The patriarch one day assembled all his disciples and said to them, "The question of incessant rebirth is a momentous one. Day after day, instead of trying to free yourselves from this bitter sea of life and death, you seem to go after tainted merits only [i.e., merits that cause rebirth]. Yet merits will be of no help if your essence of mind is obscured. Go and seek for prajna in your own mind and then write me a stanza about it. He who understands what the essence of mind is will be given the robe [the insignia of the patriarchate] and the Dharma [i.e., the esoteric teaching of the Dhyana school], and I shall make him the sixth patriarch. Go away quickly. Delay not in writing the stanza, as deliberation is quite unnecessary and of no use. The man who has realized the essence of mind can speak of it at once, as soon as he is spoken to about it; and he cannot lose sight of it, even when engaged in battle."

Having received this instruction, the disciples withdrew and said to one another, "It is of no use for us to concentrate our mind to write the stanza and submit it to His Holiness, since the patriarchate is bound to be won by Shen-hsiu, our instructor. And if we write perfunctorily, it will only be a waste of energy." Upon hearing this, all of them made up their minds not to write and said, "Why should we take the trouble? Hereafter, we will simply follow our instructor, Shen-hsiu, wherever he goes, and look to him for guidance."

Meanwhile, Shen-hsiu reasoned thus with himself: "Considering that I am their teacher, none of them will take part in the competition. I wonder whether I should write a stanza and submit it to His Holiness. If I do not, how can the patriarch know how deep or superficial my knowledge is? If my object is to get the dharma, my motive is a pure one. If I were after the patriarchate, then it would be bad. In that case, my mind would be that of a worldling and my action would amount to robbing the patriarch’s holy seat. But if I do not submit the stanza, I shall never have a chance of getting the dharma. A very difficult point to decide, indeed!"

In front of the patriarch’s hall there were three corridors, the walls of which were to be painted by a court artist named Luchen with pictures from 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 Shen-hsiu had composed his stanza he made several attempts to submit it to the patriarch, but as soon as he went near the hall his mind was so
perturbed that he sweated all over. He could not screw up courage to submit it, although in the course of four days he made altogether thirteen attempts to do so.

Then he suggested to himself, "It would be better for me to write it on the wall of the corridor and let the patriarch see it for himself. If it approves it, I shall come out to pay homage, and tell him that it is done by me; but if he disapproves it, then I shall have wasted several years in this mountain in receiving homage from others that I by no means deserve! In that case, what progress have I made in learning Buddhism?"

At twelve o'clock that night he went secretly with a lamp to write the stanza on the wall of the south corridor, so that the patriarch might know what spiritual insight he had attained. The stanza read:

Our body is the bodhi tree,
And our mind a mirror bright.
Carefully we wipe them hour by hour,
And let no dust alight.

As soon as he had written it he left at once for his room, so nobody knew what he had done. In his room he again pondered: "When the patriarch sees my stanza tomorrow and is pleased with it, I shall be ready for the dharma; but if he says that it is badly done, it will mean that I am unfit for the Dharma, owing to the misdeeds in previous lives that thickly becloud my mind. It is difficult to know what the patriarch will say about it!"

In this vein he kept on thinking until dawn, as he could neither sleep nor sit at ease.

But the patriarch knew already that Shen-hsiu had not entered the door of enlightenment, and that he had not known the essence of mind.

In the morning, he sent for Lu-chen, the court artist, and went with him to the south corridor to have the walls there painted with pictures. By chance, he saw the stanza. "I am sorry to have troubled you to come so far," he said to the artist. "The walls need not be painted now, as the sutra says, 'All forms or phenomena are transient and illusive.' It will be better to leave the stanza here, so that people may study it and recite it. If they put its teaching into actual practice, they will be saved from the misery of being born in these evil realms of existence. The merit gained by one who practices it will be great indeed!"

He then ordered incense to be burned, and all his disciples to pay homage to it and to recite it, so that they might realize the essence of mind. After they had recited it, all of them exclaimed, "Well done!"

At midnight, the patriarch sent for Shen-hsiu to come to the hall, and asked him whether the stanza was written by him or not.

"It was, sir," replied Shen-hsiu. "I dare not be so vain as to expect to get the patriarchate, but I wish Your Holiness would kindly tell me whether my stanza shows the least grain of wisdom."

"Your stanza," replied the patriarch, "shows that you have not yet realized the essence of mind. So far you have reached the door of enlightenment, but you have not yet entered it. To seek for supreme enlightenment with such an understanding as yours can hardly be successful.

"To attain supreme enlightenment, one must be able to know spontaneously one's own nature or essence of mind, which is neither created nor can it be annihilated. From kshana to kshana [thought moment to thought moment], one should be able to realize the essence of mind all the time. All things will then be free from restraint [i.e., emancipated]. Once the Tathata [suchness, another name for the essence of mind] is known, one will be free from delusion forever; and in all circumstances one's mind is absolute truth. If you can see things in such a frame of mind you will have known the essence of mind, which is supreme enlightenment.

"You had better go back to think it over again for a couple of days, and then submit me another stanza. If your stanza shows that you have entered the door of enlightenment, I will transmit to you the robe and the Dharma."

Shen-hsiu made obeisance to the patriarch and left. For several days, he tried in vain to write another stanza. This upset his mind so much that he was as ill at ease as if he were in a nightmare, and he could find comfort neither in sitting nor in walking.

Two days after, it happened that a young boy who was passing by the room where I was pounding rice recited loudly the stanza written by Shen-hsiu. As soon as I heard it, I knew at once that the composer of it had not yet realized the essence of mind. For although I had not been taught about it at that time, I already had a general idea of it.

"What stanza is this?" I asked the boy.

"You barbarian," he replied, "don't you know about it? The patriarch told his disciples that the question of incessant rebirth was a momentous one, that those who wished to inherit his robe and dharma should write
him a stanza, and that the one who had an understanding of the essence of mind would get them and be made the sixth patriarch. Elder Shen-hsiu 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 teaching into actual practice would attain great merit, and be saved from the misery of being born in the evil realms of existence."

I told the boy that I wished to recite the stanza too, so that I might have an affinity with its teaching in future life. I also told him that although I had been pounding rice there for eight months I had never been to the hall, and that he would have to show me where the stanza was to enable me to make obeisance to it.

The boy took me there and I asked him to read it to me, as I am illiterate. A petty officer of the Chiang-chou district named Chang Tih-yung, who happened to be there, read it out to me. When he had finished reading I told him that I also had composed a stanza, and asked him to write it for me. "Extraordinary indeed," he exclaimed, "that you also can compose a stanza!"

"Don't despise a beginner," said I, "if you are a seeker of supreme enlightenment. You should know that the lowest class may have the sharpest wit, while the highest may be in want of intelligence. If you slight others, you commit a very great sin."

"Dictate your stanza," said he. "I will take it down for you. But do not forget to deliver me, should you succeed in getting the dharma!"

My stanza read:

There is no bodhi tree,
Nor stand of a mirror bright.
Since all is void,
Where can the dust alight?

"When he had written this, all disciples and others who were present were greatly surprised. Filled with admiration, they said to one another, 'How wonderful! No doubt we should not judge people by appearance. How can it be that for so long we have made a bodhisattva incarnate work for us?'

Seeing that the crowd was overwhelmed with amazement, the patriarch rubbed off the stanza with his shoe, lest jealous ones should do me injury. He expressed the opinion, which they took for granted, that the author of this stanza had also not yet realized the essence of mind.

Next day, the patriarch came secretly to the room where the rice was pounded. Seeing that I was working there with a stone pestle, he said to me, "A seeker of the path risks his life for the dharma. Should he not 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 left.

Knowing what his message meant, in the third watch of the night I went to his room. Using the robe as a screen so that none could 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 at once became thoroughly enlightened, and realized that all things in the universe are the essence of mind itself.

"Who would have thought," I said to the patriarch, "that the essence of mind is intrinsically pure! Who would have thought that the essence of mind is intrinsically free from becoming or annihilation! Who would have thought that the essence of mind is intrinsically self-sufficient! Who would have thought that the essence of mind is intrinsically free from change! Who would have thought that all things are the manifestation of the essence of mind!"

Knowing that I had realized the essence of mind, the patriarch said, "For him who does not know his own mind there is no use learning Buddhism. On the other hand, if he knows his own mind and sees intuitively his own nature, he is a hero, a teacher of gods and men, a Buddha."

Thus, to the knowledge of no one, the dharma was transmitted to me at midnight, and consequently I became the inheritor of the teaching of the Sudden school as well as of the robe and the begging bowl.

KEY TERMS

Wade-Giles
Pinyin
(Japanese)

淨土
Ching-t’u
Jingtu
(Jodo)

禪
Ch’an
Chan
(Zen)

坐禪
Ch’an-ting
Chanding
(Zazen)

公案
Kung-an
Gongan
(Koan)
QUESTIONS

1. Who was Kumarajiva and what was special about his role in the historical development of Buddhism in China?

2. What is the distinguishing teaching of Tiantai Buddhism and how is this teaching expressed in the Lotus Sutra?

3. What is the distinguishing of Huayan Buddhism and how is this teaching expressed in the Avatamsaka Sutra?

4. What is the distinguishing teaching of Pure Land Buddhism and how is this teaching expressed in the Land of Bliss Sutra?

5. Who was Bodhidharma and what was his role in the historical development of Buddhism in China?

6. What is so significant in revealing the essential teaching of Chan Buddhism about the story in The Platform Sutra about how Huineng became the Sixth Patriarch of Chan Buddhism? What is the difference between Huineng’s verse and that of Shenxiu (Shen-hsiu)?

7. Who was Linji and what did he add to the practice of Chan Buddhism? What is the difference between the two main schools of Chan Buddhism?

8. In what ways does Chan Buddhism suggest the influence of Daoism?