

EXCERPTS FROM THE PLATFORM SŪTRA OF THE SIXTH
PATRIARCH

Introduction

Huineng (638-713) was the Sixth Patriarch of the Chan (Zen) school of Buddhism. Like all schools of Buddhism, the Chan school taught that all sentient beings have the Buddha nature within them and that Enlightenment is achieved by truly recognizing one's own true nature, i.e. the Buddha nature of being enlightened. The Chan school taught that enlightenment comes suddenly, in a flash of spiritual insight.

The *Platform Sūtra of the Sixth Patriarch* purports to be a record of the teachings of Huineng, as transcribed by an obscure disciple, Fahai. Given the fragmentary and disputed nature of texts from this period, it cannot be regarded as an accurate statement of actual events. It is, however, an excellent representative statement of the Chan school of Buddhism.

Document Excerpts with Questions (Longer selection follows this section)

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Excerpts from The Platform Sūtra of the Sixth Patriarch

3. "The monk Hongren asked me, 'Where are you from that you come to this mountain to make obeisance to me? Just what is it that you are looking for from me?'

"I replied, 'I am from Lingnan, a commoner from Xinzhou. I have come this long distance only to make obeisance to you. I am seeking no particular thing, but only the Buddhadharma.'

"The Master then reproved me, saying, 'If you're from Lingnan, then you're a barbarian. How can you become a Buddha?'

"I replied, 'Although people from the south and people from the north differ, there is no north and south in Buddha nature. Although my barbarian's body and your body are not the same, what difference is there in our Buddha nature?'

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Primary Source Document, with Questions (DBQ) on
EXCERPTS FROM THE PLATFORM SŪTRA OF THE SIXTH PATRIARCH

The body is the *bodhi* tree,
The mind is like a clear mirror.
At all times we must strive to polish it,
And must not let the dust collect.

...

The *bodhi* tree is originally not a tree,
The mirror also has no stand.
Buddha-nature is always clean and pure;
Where is there room for dust?

Questions:

1. Lingnan is a term for the southern part of China -- the area of modern Guangdong and Guangxi provinces. Huineng had left his home there to seek instruction with Hongren at Huangmei Temple in present-day Hubei province (in central China, well north of Lingnan). What stereotypes about the south does Hongren's comment reveal? How does Huineng respond? On what concept does Huineng's response rest?
2. What does the monk Shenxiu's four-line poem (the first of the two quoted above) indicate about the search for enlightenment? What practices might one undertake to achieve enlightenment if one accepted this poem?
3. What does Huineng's four-line poem (the second of the two quoted above) indicate about the search for enlightenment? What practices might one undertake to achieve enlightenment if one accepted this poem?

Longer Selection

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3. "The monk Hongren asked me, 'Where are you from that you come to this mountain to make obeisance to me? Just what is it that you are looking for from me?'

"I replied, 'I am from Lingnan, a commoner from Xinzhou. I have come this long distance only to make obeisance to you. I am seeking no particular thing, but only the Buddhaharma.'

"The Master then reproved me, saying, 'If you're from Lingnan, then you're a barbarian. How can you become a Buddha?'

“I replied, ‘Although people from the south and people from the north differ, there is no north and south in Buddha nature. Although my barbarian’s body and your body are not the same, what difference is there in our Buddha nature?’

“The Master wished to continue the discussion with me; however, seeing that there were other people nearby, he said no more. Then he sent me to work together with the assembly. Later a lay disciple had me go to the threshing room, where I spent over eight months treading the pestle.”

4. “Unexpectedly one day the Fifth Patriarch called all his disciples to come, and when they had assembled, he said, ‘Let me preach to you. For people in this world birth and death are vital matters. You disciples make offering all day long and seek only the field of blessings, but you do not seek to escape from the bitter sea of birth and death. Your own self-nature obscures the gateway to blessings; how can you be saved? All of you return to your rooms and look into yourselves. Men of wisdom will of themselves grasp the original nature of their *prajñā* intuition. Each of you write a verse and bring it to me. I will read your verses and if there is one who has awakened to the cardinal meaning, I will give him the robe and the *Dharma* and make him the Sixth Patriarch. Hurry, hurry!’ “

5. “The disciples received his instructions and returned each to his own room. They talked it over among themselves, saying, ‘There’s no point in our purifying our minds and making efforts to compose a verse to present to the priest. Shenxiu, the head monk, is our teacher. After he obtains the *Dharma* we can rely on him, so let’s not compose verses.’ They all then gave up trying and did not have the courage to present a verse.

“At that time there was a three-sectioned corridor in front of the Master’s hall. On the walls were to be painted pictures of stories from the *Lankāvatāra Sūtra*, together with a picture in commemoration of the Fifth Patriarch transmitting the robe and *Dharma* in order to disseminate them to later generations. The artist, Lu Zhen, had examined the walls and was to start work the next day.”

6. “The head monk, Shenxiu, thought, ‘The others won’t present a mind-verse; how can the Fifth Patriarch estimate the degree of understanding within my mind? If I offer my mind-verse to the Fifth Patriarch with the intention of gaining patriarchship, then it cannot be justified. Then it would be like a common man usurping the saintly position. But if I don’t offer my mind, then I cannot learn the *Dharma*.’ For a long time he thought about it and was very much perplexed.

“At midnight, without letting anyone see him, he went to write his mind-verse on the central section of the south corridor wall, hoping to gain the *Dharma*. ‘If the Fifth Patriarch sees my verse [tomorrow and is pleased with it, then I shall come forward and say that I wrote it. If he

tells me that it is not worthwhile, then I will know that]¹ there is a weighty obstacle in my past karma, that I cannot gain the *Dharma* and shall have to give it up. The honorable patriarch's intention is difficult to fathom.'

"Then the head monk, Shenxiu, at midnight, holding a candle, wrote a verse on the wall of the central section of the south corridor, without anyone else knowing about it. The verse read:

The body is the *bodhi* tree,
The mind is like a clear mirror.
At all times we must strive to polish it,
And must not let the dust collect."

7. "After he had finished writing this verse, the head monk, Shenxiu, returned to his room and lay down. No one had seen him.

"At dawn the Fifth Patriarch called the painter Lu to draw illustrations from the *Lankāvatāra Sūtra* on the south corridor. The Fifth Patriarch suddenly saw this verse and, having read it, said to the painter, 'I will give you thirty thousand cash. You have come a long distance to do this arduous work, but I have decided not to have the pictures painted after all. It is said in the *Diamond Sūtra*, "All forms everywhere are unreal and false." It would be best to leave this verse here and to have the deluded ones recite it. If they practice in accordance with it, they will not fall into the three evil ways. Those who practice by it will gain great benefit.'

"The Master then called all his disciples to come, and burned incense before the verse. The disciples came in to see and were all filled with admiration.

"[The Fifth Patriarch said], 'You should all recite this verse so that you will be able to see into your own natures.² With this practice you will not fall [into the three evil ways].'

"The disciples all recited it and, feeling great admiration, cried out, 'How excellent!'

"The Fifth Patriarch then called the head monk, Shenxiu, inside the hall and asked, 'Did you write this verse or not? If you wrote it, you are qualified to attain my *Dharma*.'³

"The head monk, Shenxiu, said, 'I am ashamed to say that I actually did write the verse, but I do not dare to seek the patriarchship. I beg you to be so compassionate as to tell me whether I have even a small amount of wisdom and discernment of the cardinal meaning or not.'

¹ There is a gap in the Dunhuang text at this point. The missing passage has been supplied from the Northern Song version (*Kōshōji* text).

² This statement contradicts the story as it later develops. It represents, probably, an interpolation in the text.

³ A further contradiction; the text is corrupt here.

“The Fifth Patriarch said, ‘This verse you wrote shows that you still have not reached true understanding. You have merely reached the front of the gate but have yet to be able to enter it. If common people practice according to your verse they will not fall. But in seeking the ultimate enlightenment (*bodhi*) one will not succeed with such an understanding. You must enter the gate and see your own original nature. Go and think about it for a day or two and then make another verse and present it to me. If you have been able to enter the gate and see your own original nature, then I will give you the robe and the *Dharma*.’ The head monk, Shenxiu, left, but after several days he was still unable to write a verse.”

8. “One day an acolyte passed by the threshing room reciting this verse. As soon as I heard it I knew that the person who had written it had yet to know his own nature and to discern the cardinal meaning. I asked the boy, ‘What’s the name of the verse you were reciting just now?’

“The boy answered me, saying, ‘Don’t you know? The Master said that birth and death are vital matters, and he told his disciples each to write a verse if they wanted to inherit the robe and the *Dharma*, and to bring it for him to see. He who was awakened to the cardinal meaning would be given the robe and the *Dharma* and be made the Sixth Patriarch. There is a head monk by the name of Shenxiu who happened to write a verse on formlessness on the wall of the south corridor. The Fifth Patriarch had all the disciples read the verse, [saying] that those who awakened to it would see into their own self-natures and that those who practiced according to it would attain emancipation.’

“I said, ‘I’ve been treading the pestle for eight months but haven’t been to the hall yet. I beg you to take me to the south corridor so that I can see the verse and make obeisance to it. I also want to recite it so that I can establish a causation for my next birth and be born in a Buddhaland.’

“The boy took me to the south corridor and I made obeisance before the verse. Because I was uneducated I asked someone to read it to me. As soon as I had heard it I understood the cardinal meaning. I made a verse and asked someone who was able to write to put it on the wall of the west corridor, so that I might offer my own original mind. If you do not know the original mind, studying the *Dharma* is to no avail. If you know the mind and see its true nature, you then awaken to the cardinal meaning.⁴ My verse said:

The *bodhi* tree is originally not a tree,
The mirror also has no stand.
Buddha-nature is always clean and pure;
Where is there room for dust?

⁴ These two sentences are out of context and represent a later interpolation.

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Another verse said:

The mind is the *bodhi* tree,
The body is the mirror stand.
The mirror is originally clean and pure;
Where can it be stained by dust?

“The followers in the temple were all amazed when they saw my verse. Then I returned to the threshing room. The Fifth Patriarch realized that I had a splendid understanding of the cardinal meaning. Being afraid lest the assembly know this, he said to them, ‘This is still not complete attainment.’ “