

SEEING INTO ONE'S OWN NATURE
By Linji Yixuan

Introduction

Linji Yixuan (d. 867) was a Chan (Zen) Buddhist monk of the late Tang dynasty (618-907). 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 monk Yixuan, better known as Linji after the small temple in Hebei province where he moved in 851, was the founder of what became the Linji (Rinzai) school of Buddhism. Linji's teaching of his disciples was characterized by shouting and beatings administered suddenly and in such a way as to shock the student out of his everyday consciousness and thus precipitate the sudden flash of insight in which the student would realize his own true nature.

In the sermon below, delivered before an assembly of monks and laymen, Linji explains this concept of "seeing into one's own nature."

Document Excerpts with Questions (Complete document follows this section)

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The Master addressed the assembly: "Followers of the Way, the Law of the Buddha has no room for elaborate activity; it is only everyday life with nothing to do. Evacuate, pass your water, put on your clothes, eat your food; if you are tired, lie down. The fool will laugh, but the wise man will understand. A man of old has said: 'Those who practice meditation seeking things on the outside are all imbeciles.' ... "

...

"Followers of the Way, the resolute man must know right now that from the outset there is nothing to do. But because your faith is insufficient, from moment to moment you rush about seeking; you throw away your heads and then go looking for them¹ and are yourselves unable to stop. ... At once everything is present; indeed, there is no time. Even what I have been

¹ Reference is apparently to the story of Yajñadatta from the *Śūraṅgama Sūtra*. Yajñadatta, on seeing his head in a mirror, thought he had lost it.

preaching to you is no more than medicine used temporarily to cure a disease. There is no such thing as a fixed principle.”

...

“Followers of the Way, do not acknowledge this dreamlike illusory world, for sooner or later death will come. Just what is it that you are seeking in this world that you think will give you emancipation? Go out into the world and, seeking only the barest minimum of food, make do with it; spend your time in the shabbiest garments and go to visit a good teacher. Do not heedlessly seek after pleasure. Time is precious and things change with each moment.”

Questions:

1. What concrete actions does Linji suggest to those seeking enlightenment? Why?
2. If seeking enlightenment “on the outside” is for imbeciles, then where does one seek enlightenment?
3. What sort of religious practices would a follower of Linji find rewarding? How would these contrast to the religious practices of some of the other major world religions: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam?

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The Master addressed the assembly: “Followers of the Way, the Law of the Buddha has no room for elaborate activity; it is only everyday life with nothing to do. Evacuate, pass your water, put on your clothes, eat your food; if you are tired, lie down. The fool will laugh, but the wise man will understand. A man of old has said, ‘Those who practice meditation seeking things on the outside are all imbeciles.’ If you make yourself master in all circumstances, any place you stand will be the true one. In whatever environment you find yourself you cannot be changed. You encounter evil influences; yet even the five violations² that lead to the nethermost hell will of themselves form the great sea of deliverance. Students today do not know the Law; they are like half-blind sheep who gobble up anything that comes close to their noses. They cannot distinguish between slave and master, guest and host. People such as these enter the

² Killing father, mother, or *arhat*; doing harm to the body of the Buddha; introducing disharmony into the monastic community.

Way with deluded minds and become involved in confused and crowded places. One cannot call them true monks who have left their homes; they are really nothing but laymen.

“Monks who have left their homes must be aware of what true understanding is. They must distinguish buddha and demon, true and false, sacred and profane. If they are aware in this way, then they can be called true monks who have left their homes. If they cannot distinguish buddha and demon, it is as if they had left one ordinary home only to enter another. Such people are called common karma-creating beings; they cannot yet be called true monks who have left their homes. Suppose one had a single buddha-demon, indistinguishable in one body, like milk and water mixed together. It is only the King of Geese who can drink the milk and leave the water. Followers of the Way, with a clear eye destroy both buddha and demon. If you love the sacred and hate the profane you will continue floating and sinking in the sea of birth and death.”

Someone asked, “What is this buddha-demon?”

The Master said, “A single moment of doubt on your part is the buddha-demon. Once you realize that all things are not produced, the mind, too, is like an illusion, and without a single speck of dust, it is at all times pure. This is the Buddha. Moreover, buddha and demon are the two states, purity and impurity. In my view there is no Buddha, no sentient being, no past, no present; whatever you gain you gain, and there is no need to spend time. There is nothing to practice, nothing to prove, nothing to obtain, nothing to lose; at all times there is no other thing. And even if there were something else, I say that it would be nothing but a dream and an illusion. Everything I’ve been talking about just comes to this.

“Followers of the Way, that person [you] who is standing before me, resolute and clear, listening to my sermon, gets bogged down nowhere. He penetrates in all directions and throughout the three worlds is everywhere free. Although he enters into the differentiations of all things, he cannot be changed. Within one moment he penetrates the Dharma world. When he meets a Buddha he preaches to that Buddha, when he meets a patriarch he preaches to that patriarch, when he meets a hungry ghost he preaches to that ghost. In any land he travels, although he devotes himself to the conversion of sentient beings, he never for a moment is apart [from his understanding]. All places are pure, and his light penetrates in all directions, and all things are the One.

“Followers of the Way, the resolute man must know right now that from the outset there is nothing to do. But because your faith is insufficient, from moment to moment you rush about seeking; you throw away your heads and then go looking for them³ and are yourselves unable to stop. Even the Perfect Immediate Bodhisattva,⁴ when he makes his appearance in the *Dharma*

³ See footnote 1 above.

⁴ The highest bodhisattva rank.

world, looks to the Pure Land, despises the profane, and seeks the sacred. Those such as he have yet to forget both taking and throwing away; their minds are still involved with uncleanliness and purity. This is not the view of the Chan sect. At once everything is the present; indeed, there is no time. Even what I have been preaching to you is no more than medicine used temporarily to cure a disease. There is no such thing as a fixed principle. If you understand this you are a true monk who has left his home, able to enjoy ten thousand gold coins a day.

“Followers of the Way, do not go about haphazardly accepting the sanction of any old master, saying, ‘I understand Chan, I understand the Way!’ Even though your eloquence be like a rushing torrent, it will be nothing but hell-producing karma. If you are a true student of the Way you will not look to the faults of the world, but will single-mindedly seek true understanding. Once you have achieved this true understanding and made it clear, then for the first time everything will have been completed.”

Someone asked, “What is true understanding?”

The Master said, “You enter the profane, enter the sacred, enter impurity, enter purity, enter the various Buddha worlds, enter the palace of Maitreya, enter the world of Vairocana, and everywhere all these worlds appear they are established, exist, decay, and perish into nothingness. The Buddha appeared in this world, turned the Wheel of the Law, and later entered *nirvāṇa*, but his past and future cannot be seen. Thus, seeking his birth and death is to no avail. Therefore, entering the world of no birth and no destruction and traveling about it everywhere, you enter the world of the Lotus-treasury, see the emptiness of all things, and know that all things are unreal. It is only the man who listens to the Law and is not conditioned by anything who is the mother of all Buddhas. Therefore, the Buddha was produced from the non-conditioned. If you awaken to this non-conditioned, Buddha is then something that need not be attained. Once you are aware of this, this is then true understanding.

“Students do not understand, attach to words and phrases, and because they are blocked by terms such as *sacred* and *profane*, their eye of wisdom is obscured and they cannot gain awakening. Things like the twelve divisions of the teachings are but obvious explanations. Students do not know this and thus base their understanding on such things. Because they depend on them, they fall into cause and effect and are unable to escape birth and death in the three worlds. If you wish to attain freedom in moving through the world of birth and death, then know the man who right now is listening to the Law. He is without shape, without characteristics, without root, without basis, yet always brisk and lively. There is no trace of the activity of all his many devices. If you try to find him, he is far away; if you seek him, he goes against you. Given a name, this is mystery.

“Followers of the Way, do not acknowledge this dreamlike illusory world, for sooner or later death will come. Just what is it that you are seeking in this world that you think will give you

emancipation? Go out into the world and, seeking only the barest minimum of food, make do with it; spend your time in the shabbiest garments and go to visit a good teacher. Do not heedlessly seek after pleasure. Time is precious and things change with each moment. In their grosser aspects they are subject to the four elements, earth, water, fire, and wind; in their more detailed aspects they are subject to the incessant oppression of the four states, birth, existence, change, and death. Followers of the Way, come to know the states of the four kinds of non-form and keep yourselves from being swayed by environment."

Someone asked, "What are the states of the four kinds of non-form?"

The Master said, "With a single instant of doubt in your mind, the element earth comes and impedes you; with a single instant of love in your mind, water comes and drowns you; with a single instant of anger in your mind, fire comes and burns you; with a single instant of joy in your mind, wind comes and shakes you. If you understand this well, you will not be swayed by the things around you, and everywhere you will be able to take advantage of your environment. You may rise in the east and set in the west, rise in the south and set in the north, rise in the center and set on the borders, rise on the borders and set in the center.⁵ You may walk on water as if it were land and walk on land as if it were water. Why is this so? It is because you have realized that the four elements are nothing but a dream and an illusion.

"Followers of the Way, you who are listening to the Law right now, it is not the four elements that govern you but you who can make use of these elements. If you understand this well, then whether you go or you stay you will be free. To my way of thinking there is nothing to be despised. You may say you love the sacred, but sacred is nothing but a name. Students turn to Mount Wutai and seek Mañjuśrī there. They are mistaken from the start. There is no Mañjuśrī on Mount Wutai. Do you want to know Mañjuśrī? He is our own activity right now, at all times unchanging, constant without a single moment of doubt -- this is the living Mañjuśrī. The brilliance of one instant of non-differentiation on your part -- this on all occasions and in all places is the true Samantabhadra. The one instant of thought in which you or yourself unfetter your bonds and are emancipated wherever you go -- this is becoming one with Avalokiteśvara. Together these three are both hosts and companions, and when they appear they appear together and at the same time. The one is at once the three and the three are at once the one. If you understand this, then for the first time you will be qualified to read the *sūtras*."

The Master addressed the assembly: "Students today must have faith in themselves and must not seek things on the outside. Don't take what someone else had said and on the basis of it make judgments on what is false and what is true. Even if they be [the sayings of] patriarchs and buddhas, they are no more than written traces. Some people fasten on to some phrase of the past or, fixing on something with both an obvious and a hidden meaning, allow doubts to arise

⁵ An allusion to the six different kinds of shakings of the universe when the Buddha entered into the *samādhi* of "joyful wandering."

and, then, staggering in surprise, rush madly about asking questions, and end up completely confused.

“Resolute fellows, do not spend your days in idle talk, arguing with a one-track mind about landowner and thief, good and bad, sundry pleasures and alms-giving. Here I make no distinction between monk and layman. Just let anyone at all come and I will discern him at once. No matter from where he comes, any words he may have to say will be nothing but a dream and an illusion.

“On the other hand, when I see a person who has reached a state of understanding, I see the mysterious principle of the many buddhas, the state of the buddhas cannot of itself proclaim: ‘I am the state of the buddhas.’ The follower of the Way, dependent on nothing, comes forth himself, resplendent in the state of his understanding. If someone comes forward and asks me about seeking the Buddha, I meet him on the basis of the state of purity. If someone comes forward and asks me about the bodhisattva, I meet him on the basis of the state of compassion. If someone comes forward and asks me about *bodhi*, I meet him on the basis of the state of purity and mystery. If someone comes forward and asks me about *nirvāṇa*, I meet him on the basis of the state of calmness and quiet. Although there are countless differentiations in the states, men themselves are not different. Therefore it is said: ‘The form appears in accordance with the thing, just as the moon in the water.’⁶

“Followers of the Way, if you wish to attain what is truly so you must be resolute, and then for the first time you can attain it. If you vacillate you will gain nothing. A cracked jar won’t do for storing ghee. A person of great capacity is not deluded by other men. If he makes himself master in all circumstances, then any place he stands will be the true one. No matter who comes along do not accept anything [that he says]. An instant of doubt on your part and a demon will steal into your mind, just as doubt on the part of even a bodhisattva will give an opening to the demon of birth and death. Just stop your thoughts and do not seek things on the outside! Penetrate whatever comes before you! Have faith in your own activity right now; there is no other thing. An instant of thought in your mind produces the Three Worlds, and circumstances serve to obscure the environment and turn it into the Six Dusts.⁷ What are you lacking in your immediate functioning at this very moment? In one instant you enter into purity, enter into defilement, enter the palace of Maitreya, enter the three-faceted world,⁸ and everywhere you travel you see that all things are nothing but empty names.”

⁶ Quotation from the *Sūtra of the Golden Light* (*Jin guangming jing*, TD 16, no. 663).

⁷ Sight, sound, smell, taste, thought, and idea.

⁸ Reference is to a passage in the *Flower Garland Sūtra* (*Huayan jin*, TD 9, no. 278).