

Section 19 - The Platform Sutra - by Hui-neng

19. In that case, what do we mean in this school by 'to practice Zen'? In this school, by 'to practice,' we mean not to be obstructed by anything and externally not to give rise to thoughts about objective states. And by 'Zen,' we mean to see our nature without being confused.

And what do we mean by 'Zen meditation'? Externally to be free of form is 'Zen.' And internally not to be confused is 'meditation.' Externally, if you are attached to form, internally, your mind will be confused. But if you are free of form externally, internally your nature will not be confused.

Your nature itself is pure and focused. It is just that you come into contact with objects, and as you come into contact, you become confused. When you are free of form and not confused, you are focused. To be free of form externally is 'Zen.' Not to be confused internally is 'meditation.' External Zen and internal meditation, this is what we mean by 'Zen meditation.'

The Vimalakirti Sutra says, 'Suddenly all at once, we return to our original mind.' And the Bodhisattva Precept Sutra says, 'Our original nature is pure.' Good friends, see the fundamental purity of your own nature. Cultivate and put to work for yourselves the dharma body of your own nature. Practice for yourselves the practices of a buddha. Begin and complete for yourselves the path to buddhahood.

Commentary by Red Pine

Like most Chinese Buddhist masters, Hui-neng loves playing with words and breaking them apart to see what falls out. Here, he uses the two most common expressions associated with his approach to liberation: tso-ch'an: "practicing Zen" and ch'an-ting: "Zen meditation." But instead of examining their etymology or trying to define them in a way that might give us something to hold on to, he uses them to draw us back to the wordless teaching that is the hallmark of Zen.

Instead of providing us with a set of rules, "practicing" means no rules: no internal obstructions, no external projections. And instead of providing us with a new idol to worship, "Zen" brings us face-to-face with ourselves. As we cultivate this direct practice, Zen becomes the formless form we know and see and hear within us and around us, the formless form that is us. And meditation is not about sitting just so or breathing just so or focusing our minds just so.

Meditation is the mindfulness of an unfettered mind, the mindfulness that enables us to penetrate and transform all areas of our life, not just our time on the meditation cushion, the mindfulness that enables us to practice the practices of a buddha.

This concludes Hui-neng's opening remarks that began with Section 12 and that cleared the stage of our minds for instruction in the precepts that are the focus of this sermon.

Not to be obstructed. The Chinese for this phrase calls to mind the Chinese translations of Kumarajiva and Hsuan-tsang of the Heart Sutra: "Bodhisattvas take refuge in Prajnaparamita, and their minds are without obstruction."

Objective states. This refers to the results of the process whereby we create the world around us as well as the world within. These worlds are not so much made up of objects as they are constituted by our projections. In what little we know of Shen-hsiu's teaching of meditation, he tells his disciples that this is where they should begin their practice. It was as a result of such an emphasis that his teaching became known as an indirect teaching of stages.

Meditation. This is the natural state of our minds in which “form is emptiness and emptiness is form,” to quote the Heart Sutra. To regain it, Buddhists have developed many methods. However, some of these create a temporary focusing of the mind at the risk of greater distortion by separating the mind from the mind. For Hui-neng, meditation is mindfulness. And mind-fullness is the same as mind-emptiness.

If you are free of form externally, internally your nature will not be confused. For this, the Chisung and Tsungpao editions have, “If you are free of form on the outside, your mind won’t be confused.”

When you are free of form and not confused, we are focused. The Tsungpao edition has, “If upon seeing external states, your mind is not confused, this is to be truly focused.”

Vimalakirti Sutra. This quote appears in Chapter Three of that sutra, where Vimalakirti enters into such a powerful meditation that the disciples being taught by Purna suddenly become aware of their former lives. The Tsungpao edition omits this quote.

Bodhisattva Precept Sutra. Although this is also considered a separate sutra, it is actually part of the Brahma’s Net Sutra (Fan-wangching). The above quote appears in Chapter Ten of that text, where the Buddha says, “These are the precepts of all beings. From the very beginning their nature is pure.” Thus, the sutra quoted here refers to the nature of the precepts and only indirectly to our buddha nature. I have taken the liberty of changing the pronouns in both sutra passages from third person plural to the second person plural to reflect Hui-neng’s application of these quotes to his audience.

Good friends. The Tsungpao edition simplifies the last paragraph: “Good friends, in every thought see the purity of your own nature. Cultivate, carry out, and complete for yourselves the path to buddhahood.”

Red Pine. The Platform Sutra: The Zen Teaching of Hui-neng (pp. 154-155). Kindle Edition.