The Sutra of Hui-neng

The career of Hui-neng had an incalculable effect on the dissemination of Zen in China. According to the biography of Hui-neng recorded in traditional Zen sources, there were thirty-three people known as formal successors of the Grand Master, who taught Zen openly. There were an unrecorded number of others who attained the teaching, the biography adds, who concealed their names and hid their tracks. The names of ten of these hidden masters have been found, although nothing else is known of them. Besides these forty-three known successors of Hui-neng, Grand Master of Zen, it is also said that countless people “awakened to the Way transcend the ordinary” under the impact of his teaching.

Two versions of Hui-neng’s sutra, called the Altar Sutra, are readily available today. A manuscript of an older, briefer version attributed to Hui-neng’s disciple Fa-hai was discovered among the many works unearthed at Tun-huang. A more detailed version compiled in 1291 was based on a number of texts. It is on this fuller version that the present translation is based.

The compiler of this version of the sutra, a monk named Tsung-pao, notes in an afterword to his edition:

The teachings that the Sixth Grand Master used to expound were all the complete all-at-once message of the Great Vehicle; that is why this is called a sutra. The words are everyday, but its guidance is far-reaching; the expression is easy, the meaning is clear. Everyone who reads it gets something from it. Master Ming-chiao praised it by saying, “Those whose natural potential is sharp will get the deep, those whose natural potential is dull will get the shallow.” How true these words are!

When I first entered the Way, I was inspired by this sutra. Subsequently I saw three different texts of varying quality. The woodblocks were already worn out, so I made a comparison of the texts, correcting errors and filling in abbreviations, also adding the stories of disciples’ questions, in hopes that those who wish to learn may get the message.

Personal History
Realization of the Teaching and Inheritance of the Robe

When the Great Master came to the Forest of Jewels Monastery, Governor Wei of Shao Province went into the mountains with some government officers to request the Master to come out into the city and preach for the people at the lecture hall of the Great Brahma Monastery.

When the Master took the chair, the governor, over thirty officials, over thirty Confucian scholars, and more than one thousand monks, nuns, and laypeople all bowed at once and asked to hear the essentials of the teaching.

The Great Master said to the crowd:

Good friends, bodhi is inherently pure; just use this mind, and you will directly realize buddhahood.

Good friends, for now listen to the course of events through which I realized the teaching.

My father was originally from Fan-yang, but he was banished to Ling-nan, where he became a peasant in Hsin (“New”) Province. Unfortunately for me, my father also died early. With my widowed mother I moved to Nan-hai, where we suffered from poverty as I sold firewood for a living.

One day a customer purchased some kindling and had me deliver it to his shop. The customer received the wood, and I left the shop with my money. Outside, I saw a traveler reciting a scripture. On hearing the words of the scripture, my mind opened up and I understood.

I asked the traveler what scripture he was reciting. He said it was the Diamond Sutra. I then asked him where he had gotten this scripture from. He said, “I got it from the Eastern Meditation Monastery in Huang-mei Prefecture in Ch’i Province, where Great Master Hung-jen, the Fifth Grand Master [of Ch’i Buddhism], is teaching
over a thousand students. I went there and listened to this scripture that the Great Master always recommends to both clergy and lay folk, saying that if they keep the Diamond Sutra, they will see their own essential nature and directly realize Buddhahood.

Hearing this explanation, I felt a preexisting affinity. I was given ten ounces of silver by a customer to enable me to provide food and clothing for my mother, letting me go right to Huang-mei to call on the Fifth Grand Master.

After having gotten my mother settled, I left right away and reached Huang-mei within thirty-odd days. There I paid respects to the Fifth Grand Master.

The Grand Master asked, “Where are you from, and what do you want?”

I replied, “I am a peasant from Hsin Province in Ling-nan. I have come from far away to pay my respects to you only because I seek to be a buddha, nothing else.”

The Grand Master said, “You are a southerner, and an aborigine; how can you be a buddha?”

I said, “People may be southerners or northerners, but the buddha-nature originally has no south or north. As an aborigine, my social status is not the same as yours, but what difference is there in our buddha-nature?”

The Grand Master wanted to talk with me more, but he saw that his followers were all around, so he had me do chores with the workers.

I said to him, “My own mind always produces wisdom. Not being alienated from one’s own essential nature is itself a field of blessings. What work would you have me do?”

The Grand Master said, “This aborigine is very sharp! Don’t say any more. Go work in the mill.”

So I retired to a back building, where a worker had me splitting firewood and pounding rice. I spent over eight months at this, when the Grand Master saw me one day and said, “I think your insight is reliable, but I was afraid bad people would harm you, so I didn’t talk to you. Do you realize this?”

I said, “I do know your intention. That is why I didn’t dare walk in front of the auditorium, lest one be careless.”

One day the Grand Master called all his disciples to him and said, “I tell you, for people in this world the matter of birth and death is serious. You lot just seek fields of blessings all day long, and do not seek to get out of the ocean of misery of birth and death.

“If your own nature is confused, how can blessings save you? Let each of you look into your own wisdom, grasp the insightful nature of your own basic mind, and compose a verse to show me. If you have understood the great meaning, I will bequeath to you the robe and the teaching, and make you the Sixth Grand Master.

“It is urgent, so do not tarry. Thinking about it is no use—people who have seen essential nature should see it the moment it’s mentioned. Someone like this could see it even in a battle line of whirling swords.”

After the followers had received these directions, they withdrew and said to each other, “The bunch of us don’t have to clear our minds and concentrate on composing verses to show the teacher. What would be the use? Shen-hsiu the senior is presently the mentor—he will surely get it. If the likes of us presumed to compose verses, we’d be wasting mental energy.”

Other people hearing this all set their minds to rest, saying, “We will rely on Master Shen-hsiu after all; why bother to compose a verse?”

Shen-hsiu reflected, “The reason the others won’t present verses is that I am their mentor. I must compose a verse to present to the teacher—if I do not present a verse, how will the teacher know the depth or shallowness of the insight and understanding within my mind? If my intention in presenting a verse is to seek the teaching, then it is good; if it is to seek the rank of Grand Master, that is bad—it would be the same as the ordinary mentality. How would it be different from usurping the rank of a sage? If I do not present a verse, I’ll never get the teaching. This is very difficult, very difficult.”

In front of the Fifth Grand Master’s auditorium was a hallway three rooms long, where they were going to have an artist paint a mural of the projection of the Lankavatara-sutra and the succession of the five Grand Masters of Ch’an. After Shen-hsiu had composed his verse, several times he got as far as the front of the auditorium intending to present it, but each time he felt faint and broke out in a sweat. Unable to bring himself to present his verse, over a period of four days he made thirteen unsuccessful attempts.

Finally Shen-hsiu thought, “It would be better if I wrote the verse
in the hallway, where the teacher can see it. If the teacher says it is good, I will respectfully come forth and declare it to be my composition. If he says it won’t do, I have been wasting years in the mountains accepting respect from others—what further path would I practice?” That night, in the middle of the night, letting no one know, he took a lamp and wrote his verse on the wall of the south hallway, presenting his insight.

The verse said,

The body is the tree of enlightenment,
The mind is like a clear mirror-stand.
Polish it diligently time and again,
Not letting it gather dust.

Having written this, Shen-hsiu went back to his room, totally undetected by anyone.

Shen-hsiu also thought, “If the Grand Master is pleased when he sees my verse tomorrow, then I have affinity with the teaching. If he says it is unworthy, it is my own illusion—the barriers of my existing habits are manifold, and I am not fit to get the teaching. The mind of a sage is hard to fathom.”

As he thought in his room, he was uneasy whether he sat up or lay down. This continued until dawn.

Now the Grand Master already knew that Shen-hsiu had not yet entered the gate and did not see his own essential nature. In the morning he called the artist Lu Kung-feng to make the mural on the wall of the south hallway.

Suddenly seeing the verse, the Grand Master told the artist not to proceed with the mural, thanking him for his trouble. “Scripture says that all forms are illusory,” he said. “Just leave this verse for people to recite. If they act in accord with this verse, they will avoid falling into evil ways; there is great benefit in acting according to this verse.”

He instructed the disciples to light incense, pay respect to the verse, and learn the verse so they could see essential nature. The disciples recited the verse, and all celebrated it admiringly.

In the middle of the night, the Grand Master asked Shen-hsiu to his quarters and said, “Was it you who composed the verse?”

Shen-hsiu said, “I did compose the verse, but I do not presume to seek the rank of Grand Master. I hope for your compassion, to see whether I have any wisdom or not.”

The Grand Master said, “Your composition of this verse indicates you have not yet seen your fundamental nature. You have only arrived outside the gate; you have not yet entered inside. If you seek unsurpassed enlightenment with an understanding like this, you will never be able to attain it. Unsurpassed enlightenment requires that you be able to recognize your own basic mind at a word, and see your own original nature, unborn and undying. When you see yourself at all times, moment to moment, with no lingering over anything at all, as one is real all are real—myriad objects are themselves suchness as is. Consciousness of suchness as is is real truth; if you see in this way, this is the inherent nature of unsurpassed enlightenment.

“Go away for now and reflect for a day or two. Then compose another verse. If I see by your verse that you have succeeded in entering the gate, I will entrust the robe and the teaching to you.”

Shen-hsiu bowed and left. When several more days had passed, and he still had not managed to produce a verse, he felt faint at heart and uneasy in spirit and thought. He was as if in a dream. He was uneasy and uncomfortable whether he was walking around or sitting down.

Two days later, a boy passing by the mill was chanting that verse. As soon as I heard it, I realized this verse did not yet reveal the fundamental essence. Although I had not received instruction, I already knew the main idea, so I asked the boy, “What verse is that you’re chanting?”

The boy said, “You aborigine! Don’t you know that the Grand Master said for people in this world the matter of birth and death is serious—if they want to get transmission of the robe and the teaching, he had the disciples compose verses. If anyone has realized the great meaning, he will transmit the robe and the teaching and make him the Sixth Grand Master. The senior monk Shen-hsiu wrote this formless verse on the wall of the south hallway; the Grand Master had everyone memorize it, saying that if one puts this verse into practice one will avoid falling into evil ways, and if one puts this verse into practice one will gain great benefit.”

I said, “I have been here pounding rice for over eight months, and have never been to the auditorium. Please take me to where the verse is, so I can pay my respects.”

When the boy had led me to the verse to pay respects, I said, “I
am illiterate; please read it for me.” At that time the lieutenant military inspector of Chiang Province was there, a man named Chang Chih-yung; he read the verse aloud. After I’d heard it, I said I had a verse too, and asked the lieutenant inspector to write it for me.

The lieutenant inspector said, “How extraordinary that you too would compose a verse!”

I said to the lieutenant inspector, “If you want to learn supreme enlightenment, don’t slight beginners. A person of the lowest rank may have the very highest knowledge, while a person of the highest rank may lack practical wisdom. If you slight people, you will have done incalculable wrong.”

The lieutenant inspector said, “Recite your verse, and I will write it for you. If you attain the teaching, you should liberate me. Don’t forget these words.”

My verse went this way:

Enlightenment originally has no tree,
And a clear mirror is not a stand.
Originally there’s not a single thing—
Where can dust be attracted?

After this verse had been written down, the whole community was amazed, and everyone wondered. They said to each other, “How odd! You can’t tell about people by their appearance! How could we have employed him, a living bodhisattva, as a servant for so long?”

Seeing the surprise and wonder of the crowd, the Grand Master feared someone might do me harm, so he erased the verse with his shoe and said, “This is still not yet perception of essence.”

Everyone thought it was so, but the next day the Grand Master surreptitiously came to the mill, where he saw me pounding rice, a stone at my waist. He said, “People who seek the Way forget their bodies for the sake of the teaching; will he be like this?” Then he asked me, “Is the rice ready yet?”

I replied, “The rice has been ready for a long time, but it still wants sifting.”

The Grand Master knocked the mortar three times with his cane. Immediately understanding the Grand Master’s meaning, I went to his room at the third watch [in the middle of the night]. Using his vestment as a screen so no one could see us, he explained the Dia-
I asked, “Where should I go?”
The Grand Master said, “Stop when you meet Huai; hibernate when you encounter Hui.”

Taking the robe and bowl in the middle of the night, I said, “I am originally a southerner, unfamiliar with the mountain roads here. How can I get out to the mouth of the river?”
The Fifth Grand Master said, “Don’t worry. I’ll take you there myself.” The Grand Master then took me right to Nine River Station, where he had me get onto a boat. The Fifth Grand Master himself took up the oars and rowed.

I asked the Grand Master to sit down and let me row, but he said, “It is appropriate that I ferry you across.”

I said, “When people are at a loss, the guide ferries them over; when one is enlightened, one ferries oneself over.”

The Grand Master said, “So it is. It is so. Hereafter Buddhism will become very popular through you. Three years after you go, I will depart from this world. Now you should go; make your way to the South. It is better not to speak out too quickly; it is hard to promote Buddhism.”

After I had bade farewell and left the Grand Master, I set out southward. Within two months I reached Mount Ta Yu.

(After the Fifth Grand Master returned, he did not lecture for several days. The community was perplexed. They asked if he were unwell or indisposed. He replied that it was not that he was ill, but that the teaching had already gone South. When they asked to whom it had been transmitted, he replied, “The capable one got it.” The community then knew who it was [because “capable” is the meaning of the neng in the name Hui-neng].)

Several hundred people came after me, wanting to take the robe and bowl away. One monk, named Hui-ming, formerly a four-star general and a rough-and-ready type of man, joined in the pursuit with extreme enthusiasm. He chased me down before anyone else.

I tossed the robe and bowl onto a rock and said, “This robe represents faith; is it appropriate to struggle over it?” Then I hid in the brush.

Hui-ming went over to the robe and bowl and tried to pick them up, but he could not move them. Then he called to me, “Workman, I’ve come for the teaching, not for the robe!!”

I then came out and sat on a boulder. Hui-ming bowed and said, “Please explain the teaching to me, Workman.”

I said, “Since you have come for the teaching, you should shut out all objects and do not conceive a single thought; then I will expound the teaching for you.”

Hui-ming was silent for a long while. I said, “When you do not think of good and do not think of bad, what is your original face?”

At these words, Hui-ming was greatly enlightened. Then he asked, “Is there any further secret idea besides the secret idea just now secretly spoken?”

I said, “What I have told you is no secret. If you reflect inwardly, the secret is in you.”

Hui-ming said, “Although I was at Huang-mei, in reality I had not yet seen into my own face. Now that I have received your instruction, I am like a man who takes a drink of water and knows for himself whether it is cold or warm. Now you are my teacher, Workman.”

I said, “If you are thus, you and I are both students of Huang-mei. Maintain it carefully on your own.”

Hui-ming also asked, “Where should I go after this?”

I said, “If you come to Yuan, then stop; if you come to Meng, then stay.”

Hui-ming bowed and took leave. (When Hui-ming got to the foot of the mountain, he said to the crowd of pursuers, “I have just climbed to the heights, but after all there was no trace of him. We had better look elsewhere.” The pursuers all believed him. Hui-ming later changed his name to Tao-ming, to avoid assuming the same first character as the Master Hui-neng.)

Later I came to Ts’ao-ch’i, but I was again pursued by bad men, and took refuge among a group of hunters in the Ssu-ming Range. I spent fifteen years among them, occasionally expounding the teaching to the hunters when suitable opportunities arose.

The hunters used to have me watch over the nets, but whenever I’d see living creatures, I would let them all go. At mealtimes I would put vegetables in the pot where the meat was being cooked. If anyone asked me about it, I’d reply that I just ate the vegetables beside the meat.

One day I thought that the time had come to disseminate the teaching, and I shouldn’t stay in hiding forever. So I finally left and
went to the Temple of the Nature of Reality in Kuang Province. There I found the doctrinal master Yin-tsung lecturing on the Nirvana-sutra.

At the time there was a wind blowing, and the pennants were flapping. One monk said, "The wind is moving." Another said, "The pennants are moving." They argued on and on, so I came forward and said, "It is not the wind moving, it is not the pennants moving; it is your minds moving."

Everyone was startled. Yin-tsung invited me up to the front seat and questioned me closely about the inner meaning. He saw that my speech was simple and my reasoning was accurate; and that this did not come from writings.

Yin-tsung said, "Workman, you are certainly not an ordinary man. For a long time I've heard that the robe and teaching of Huang-mei came South. Might that not be you, Workman?"

I said, "I dare not presume."

Now Yin-tsung bowed, and asked me to show the community the robe and bowl that had been handed on to me. Yin-tsung also asked, "How is the legacy of Huang-mei demonstrated and transmitted?"

I said, "There is no demonstration or transmission; it is only a matter of seeing nature, not a matter of meditation or liberation."

Yin-tsung asked, "Why is it not a matter of meditation and liberation?"

I said, "Because these two things are not Buddhism; Buddhism is a nondualistic teaching."

Yin-Tsung asked, "What is the nondualistic teaching of Buddhism?"

I said, "You lecture on the Nirvana-sutra, which explains buddha-nature. This is the nondualistic teaching of Buddhism. For example, the bodhisattva King of Noble Qualities says to Buddha, 'Will violation of the four serious prohibitions, commission of the five perverse sins, or being hopelessly incorrigible, cut off the roots of goodness and essential nature of buddhahood?'

'Buddha said, 'Roots of goodness are twofold: one permanent, one impermanent. Essential buddha-nature is neither permanent nor impermanent, so it is not cut off; that is called nonduality.

'Oneness is good, dualism is not good. The essential buddha-nature is neither good nor not good; this is called nonduality.

'Ordinary people see the body and the world as two; the wise realize their essential nature is not two. The nondual nature is the buddha-nature.'"

Hearing this explanation, Yin-tsung was overjoyed. Joining his palms, he said, "My lectures on the scripture are like gravel; your discourse on meaning is like pure gold."

Now he shaved my head for me and wished to regard me as his teacher. So I finally opened up the East Mountain School under the enlightenment tree.

I attained the teaching on East Mountain, enduring extreme hardship and pain, my life hanging by a thread. Now that I have gotten to participate in this assembly along with the governor and his officers, monks, nuns, and laypeople, it is all people of eons of affinity; and it is because of having supported buddhas in past lives, planting roots of goodness together, that you have gotten to hear the foregoing account of attainment of the truth of the teaching of immediacy.

The teaching of immediacy was transmitted by past sages; it is not my own personal wisdom. Those who wish to hear the teaching of the sages of yore should each clear your own mind. After you have heard it, each of you get rid of doubt by yourself, and you will be no different from the sages of former generations.

Having heard the teaching, the whole assembly joyfully bowed and withdrew.