Bodhidharma’s Treatise on Awakening to One’s True Nature

Written by Patriarch Bodhidharma; Edited and Engraved by the Monastic Shi Zongjing of Huayan Temple, Yuzhou

Contents

Bodhidharma’s Treatise on Awakening to One’s True Nature

Bodhidharma’s Treatise on Awakening to One’s True Nature

The Way takes quiescent cessation as its essence; cultivation takes freedom from appearances as its guiding principle. Thus a sūtra says: “Quiescent cessation is bodhi, because it extinguishes all appearances.”

Buddha means awakening. When a person has an awakened mind and attains the path of bodhi, that person is called a Buddha. A sūtra says: “To be free from all appearances is called the Buddhas.” Thus we know that appearances are the appearances of no appearance. They cannot be seen with the eyes; they can only be known through wisdom. Whoever hears this Dharma and gives rise to a single thought of faith has thereby aroused the Mahāyāna and transcended the three realms.

The three realms are greed, anger, and ignorance. To turn greed, anger, and ignorance around into precepts, samādhi, and wisdom is called transcending the three realms. Yet greed, anger, and ignorance themselves have no real nature; they are spoken of only in relation to sentient beings. If one can turn the light inward and clearly see the nature of greed, anger, and ignorance, that very nature is Buddha-nature. Apart from greed, anger, and ignorance, there is no separate Buddha-nature. A sūtra says: “From the very beginning, all Buddhas have always dwelt amid the three poisons, nurtured the wholesome dharmas, and thereby become World-Honored Ones.” The three poisons are greed, anger, and ignorance.

As for the Mahāyāna and the Supreme Vehicle, these are the realm of practice of bodhisattvas. There is nothing they do not carry across, yet there is also nothing that is carried across. All day long they carry across, yet they have never carried across. This is the Buddha Vehicle. A sūtra says: “No vehicle is the Buddha Vehicle.” If one

knows that the six sense faculties are insubstantial and that the five aggregates are merely provisional names, then, seeking throughout the entire body, one will certainly find no fixed locus. Such a person understands the Buddha's words. A sūtra says: "The dwelling-place of the five aggregates is called a Chan monastery." When inward illumination opens into understanding, this is the gate of the Mahāyāna. How could this not be understood?

Not recollecting any dharma is called Chan meditation. If one understands these words, then walking, standing, sitting, and lying down are all Chan meditation. Knowing that mind is empty is called seeing the Buddha. Why is this so? The Buddhas of the ten directions all abide in no-mind; not seeing mind is called seeing the Buddha. Giving up one's body without reluctance is called great giving. Being free from all movement and stillness is called great seated Chan. Why is this so? Ordinary beings are invariably in motion, while followers of the Lesser Vehicle are invariably in stillness. This refers to seated Chan that transcends both ordinary beings and the Lesser Vehicle. If one understands it in this way, all appearances will be understood of themselves without being sought, and all ailments will heal of themselves without treatment. All this is the power of great Chan meditation.

Those who use mind to seek the Dharma are deluded; those who do not use mind to seek the Dharma are awakened. Not clinging to words is called liberation; not being defiled by the six sense objects is called protecting the Dharma; leaving birth and death is called leaving home; not receiving further existence is called attaining the Way; not giving rise to deluded thoughts is called nirvāṇa; not abiding in ignorance is great wisdom; where there are no afflictions is called parinirvāṇa; where there are no appearances of mind is called the other shore.

When deluded, there is this shore; when awakened, there is no this shore. Why is this so? Ordinary beings invariably abide on this shore. But those awakened to the Supreme Vehicle abide neither on this shore nor on the other shore, and therefore can be free from both shores. If one sees the other shore as different from this shore, that person's mind has already lost Chan meditation.

Afflictions are called sentient beings; awakening and understanding are called bodhi. They are neither one nor different; they are separated only by delusion and awakening.

When deluded, there is a world to escape from; when awakened, there is no world to escape from. Within the Dharma of equality, one does not see ordinary beings as different from sages. A sūtra says: "Ordinary beings cannot enter the Dharma of equality, and sages cannot practice it." The Dharma of equality is practiced only by great bodhisattvas and all Buddhas and Tathāgatas. If one sees birth as different from death, or movement as different from stillness, all this is called inequality.

Not seeing afflictions as different from nirvāṇa is called equality. Why is this so? Afflictions and nirvāṇa share the same nature of emptiness. Therefore, followers of the Lesser Vehicle mistakenly sever afflictions and mistakenly enter nirvāṇa, becoming obstructed by nirvāṇa. Bodhisattvas know that the nature of afflictions is empty and therefore do not depart from emptiness; thus they always abide in nirvāṇa. Nirvāṇa means: nir, not arising; vāṇa, not dying. To leave birth and death is to enter parinirvāṇa. When mind has neither coming nor going, one enters nirvāṇa. Thus know that nirvāṇa is precisely the empty mind.

When all Buddhas enter nirvāṇa, they abide where there are no deluded thoughts. When bodhisattvas enter the place of awakening, it is precisely where there are no afflictions. An empty and unoccupied place is precisely where there is no greed, anger, or ignorance. Greed is the desire realm, anger is the form realm, and ignorance is the formless realm. When a single thought arises, one enters the three realms; when a single thought ceases, one leaves the three realms. Thus know that the arising and ceasing of the three realms, and the existence and nonexistence of the myriad dharmas, all arise from one mind.

Whenever one speaks of a single dharma, it seems to refer to insentient things such as broken tiles, stones, bamboo, and wood. If one knows that mind is a provisional name without any substantial entity, then one knows that one's own mind is likewise neither existent nor nonexistent. Why is this so? Ordinary beings invariably give rise to mind, and this is called existence; followers of the Lesser Vehicle invariably extinguish mind, and this is called nonexistence. Bodhisattvas and Buddhas have never given rise to mind and have never extinguished mind. This is called the mind that is neither existent nor nonexistent. The mind that is neither existent nor nonexistent is called the Middle Way.

Thus know that to hold onto mind in studying the Dharma is for mind and Dharma alike to be deluded; not to hold onto mind in studying the Dharma is for mind and Dharma alike to be awakened. Those who are deluded are deluded with regard to awakening; those who are awakened are awakened with regard to delusion. A person of right view knows that mind is empty and nonexistent, and thereby transcends delusion and awakening. Only when there is neither delusion nor awakening is there true understanding and right view.

Form does not form itself; because of mind, there is form. Mind does not mind itself; because of form, there is mind. Thus know that mind and form mutually arise and cease together.

Existence exists in relation to nonexistence, and nonexistence is nonexistence in relation to existence. This is called true seeing. True seeing is seeing nothing, yet there is nothing it does not see. Its seeing fills the ten directions, yet there has never

been any seeing. Why is this so? Because there is nothing seen; because seeing is without seeing; because seeing is not seeing. What ordinary beings see is all called deluded thought. Only when there is quiescent cessation and no seeing is it called true seeing. Mind and objects stand in opposition, and seeing arises between them. If inwardly mind does not arise, then outwardly objects do not arise. When objects and mind are both pure, this is called true seeing. To understand in this way is called right view.

Not seeing any dharma is called attaining the Way; not understanding any dharma is called understanding the Dharma. Why is this so? Seeing and not seeing are both without seeing; understanding and not understanding are both without understanding. Seeing without seeing is called true seeing; understanding without understanding is called great understanding. Right seeing is not merely seeing seeing; it also sees not seeing. True understanding is not merely understanding understanding; it also understands non-understanding. Whatever is understood is called not understanding. Only that which has nothing to understand is called right understanding. Understanding and not understanding are both not understanding.

A sūtra says: “Not relinquishing wisdom is called ignorance.” When mind is taken to be empty, both understanding and not understanding are true; when mind is taken to be existent, both understanding and not understanding are deluded. When one understands, the Dharma follows the person; when one does not understand, the person follows the Dharma. When the Dharma follows the person, what is not Dharma becomes Dharma. When the person follows the Dharma, Dharma becomes not Dharma. When the person follows the Dharma, all dharmas are deluded; when the Dharma follows the person, all dharmas are true.

Therefore, sages neither use mind to seek the Dharma, nor use the Dharma to seek mind; neither use mind to seek mind, nor use the Dharma to seek the Dharma. Therefore mind does not give rise to Dharma, and Dharma does not give rise to mind. Mind and Dharma are both quiescent; thus they always abide in samādhi.

When sentient beings’ minds arise, the Buddhadharma ceases; when sentient beings’ minds cease, the Buddhadharma arises. When mind arises, the true Dharma ceases; when mind ceases, the true Dharma arises. Having known that all dharmas are each unrelated to the others is called being one who has attained the Way. One who knows that mind is not connected to any dharma always abides in the place of awakening.

When deluded, there is wrongdoing; when understanding arises, there is no wrongdoing. Why is this so? Because the nature of wrongdoing is empty. When deluded, one sees wrongdoing where there is no wrongdoing; when understanding arises, even wrongdoing is not wrongdoing. Why is this so? Because wrongdoing has

no locus. A sūtra says: “All dharmas are without nature; do not doubt their true functioning. Doubt itself becomes wrongdoing.” Why is this so? Wrongdoing arises from doubt and confusion. If one understands in this way, the karmic offenses of former lives will be extinguished.

When deluded, the six consciousnesses and five aggregates are all dharmas of affliction, birth, and death; when awakened, the six consciousnesses and five aggregates are all nirvāṇa, dharmas free from birth and death. Practitioners of the Way do not seek the Way outwardly. Why is this so? Knowing mind is the Way, when one attains mind, there is no mind to attain; when one attains the Way, there is no Way to attain. To say that one can attain the Way by using mind to seek it is all called wrong view.

When deluded, there are Buddhas and Dharma; when awakened, there are no Buddhas and no Dharma. Why is this so? Awakening itself is Buddhadharma. For practitioners of the Way, when the body perishes, the Way is accomplished, just as a tree breaks when its shell splits. Having been born into this karmically retributive body, every thought is impermanent, and there is no fixed dharma. One need only cultivate according to each thought. One must neither loathe birth and death nor love birth and death; one must simply not give rise to deluded thoughts in every thought. Then in life one realizes nirvāṇa with remainder, and at death one enters the forbearance of the unborn dharmas.

When the eye sees form, not being defiled by form, and when the ear hears sound, not being defiled by sound—this is all liberation. When the eye does not cling to form, the eye is a gate of Chan; when the ear does not cling to sound, the ear is a gate of Chan. In sum, when seeing form, there is the nature that sees form; not clinging is constant liberation, while seeing the appearance of form is constant bondage. Not being bound by afflictions is called liberation; there is no other liberation.

Those who contemplate form well do not let form give rise to mind, nor do they let mind give rise to form. Thus form and mind are both pure. When there are no deluded thoughts, one thought is one Buddha-land; when there are deluded thoughts, one thought is one hell. Sentient beings fabricate deluded thoughts and use mind to give rise to mind; therefore they constantly remain in hell. Bodhisattvas observe deluded thoughts and do not use mind to give rise to mind; therefore they constantly remain in the Buddha-land. If one does not use mind to give rise to mind, then each moment of mind enters emptiness, and every thought returns to stillness; one passes from one Buddha-land to another Buddha-land. If one uses mind to give rise to mind, then each moment of mind is not still, and every thought returns to movement; one passes from one hell through another hell.

If a single thought of mind arises, there are the two karmas of good and evil, and there are heavens and hells. If a single thought of mind does not arise, there are no two karmas of good and evil, and there are no heavens or hells. Its essence is neither existent nor nonexistent: among ordinary beings it is existent, while among sages it is nonexistent. Sages have no such mind; therefore their hearts are open and empty, their measure equal to that of heaven. All that follows is realization within the great Way; it is not the realm of the Lesser Vehicle or of ordinary beings.

When mind attains nirvāṇa, it does not see that there is nirvāṇa. Why is this so? Mind is nirvāṇa. If, apart from mind, one sees another nirvāṇa, this is called clinging to wrong view. All afflictions are the seed-mind of the Tathāgata, for wisdom is attained through afflictions. One may only say that afflictions give rise to the Tathāgata; one cannot say that afflictions are the Tathāgata.

Therefore, body and mind are the field, afflictions are the seeds, wisdom is the sprout, and the Tathāgata is likened to the grain. The Buddha is within the mind as fragrance is within a tree. When afflictions are exhausted, the Buddha emerges from the mind; when decay and rot are exhausted, fragrance emerges from the tree. Thus know that outside the tree there is no fragrance, and outside the mind there is no Buddha. If there is fragrance outside the tree, it is another fragrance; if there is a Buddha outside the mind, it is another Buddha.

When the three poisons are in the mind, this is called a defiled and evil land; when the three poisons are absent from the mind, this is called a pure land. A sūtra says: “If a land were impure and filled with defilement and evil, it would be impossible for all Buddhas, the World-Honored Ones, to appear within it.” Impurity, defilement, and evil are ignorance and the three poisons; all Buddhas, the World-Honored Ones, are the pure and awakened mind.

All speech is none other than Buddhadharma. If one can be free of what one says, then speaking all day is the Way; if one clings to what one says, then remaining silent all day is not the Way. Therefore, the Tathāgata’s speech does not depend on silence, and silence does not depend on speech. Speech does not depart from silence. Those who awaken to this speech and silence are all in samādhi. If one knows the proper time and speaks, speech too is liberation; if one does not know the proper time and remains silent, silence too is bondage. Therefore, if speech is free from appearances, speech too is called liberation; if silence clings to appearances, silence is bondage.

Words and letters are originally liberated in their nature. Words and letters cannot produce bondage; bondage has never originally depended on words and letters. The Dharma has neither high nor low; if one sees high and low, that is not Dharma. What

is not Dharma is a raft; Dharma is a raft for people. When people board that raft, they cross over what is not Dharma, and that itself is Dharma.

In worldly terms, there are distinctions of male and female, noble and base; but in terms of the Way, there are no such distinctions. Thus the heavenly maiden awakened to the Way without changing her female form, and Channa realized the truth without needing to discard his lowly designation. This shows that male and female, noble and base, are all grounded in the one characteristic. For twelve years, the heavenly maiden sought the characteristic of womanhood and could not obtain it; thus she knew that, for twelve years, the characteristic of manhood likewise could not be obtained. The twelve years are the twelve sense bases.

Apart from mind there is no Buddha, and apart from Buddha there is no mind. This is like there being no ice apart from water, and no water apart from ice. When one speaks of being apart from mind, this does not mean being distant from mind; it means simply not clinging to the characteristics of mind. A sūtra says, “Not seeing characteristics is called seeing the Buddha.” This is to be apart from the characteristics of mind. “Apart from Buddha there is no mind” means that Buddha comes forth from mind and mind can give rise to Buddha. Yet although Buddha is born from mind, mind has never been born from Buddha.

This is also like fish being born in water, while water is not born from fish. When one wishes to look at fish, before seeing the fish one first sees the water. When one wishes to see the Buddha, before seeing the Buddha one first sees the mind. Thus, once one has seen the fish, one forgets the water; once one has seen the Buddha, one forgets the mind. If one does not forget the mind, one is still deluded by mind; if one does not forget the water, one is still bewildered by water.

Sentient beings and bodhi are also like ice and water. When burned by the three poisons, it is called a sentient being; when purified by the three liberations, it is called bodhi. When frozen by the three winters, it is called ice; when melted by the three summers, it is called water. If ice is set aside, there is no separate water; if sentient beings are cast aside, there is no separate bodhi. Clearly, the nature of ice is precisely the nature of water, and the nature of water is precisely the nature of ice.

The nature of sentient beings is precisely the nature of bodhi. Sentient beings and bodhi share one nature, just as aconite and monkshood share the same root. It is only because their seasons differ and delusion distinguishes their circumstances that the two names, sentient beings and bodhi, arise. Thus, when a snake transforms into a dragon, it does not change its scales; when an ordinary person transforms into a sage, the person does not change their face. One who knows the mind has wisdom within; one who illuminates the body has discipline without.

Sentient beings truly liberate Buddhas, and Buddhas liberate sentient beings; this is called equality. Sentient beings liberate Buddhas when afflictions give rise to awakening and understanding; Buddhas liberate sentient beings when awakening and understanding extinguish afflictions. Thus, it is not that there are no afflictions, nor that there is no awakening and understanding. Without afflictions, awakening and understanding could not arise; without awakening and understanding, afflictions could not be extinguished.

When deluded, Buddhas liberate sentient beings; when awakened, sentient beings liberate Buddhas. Why is this so? Buddhas do not become Buddhas by themselves; they do so entirely through being liberated by sentient beings.

The buddhas take ignorance as their father and craving as their mother; ignorance and craving are both other names for sentient beings. Sentient beings and ignorance are like the left palm and the right palm: there is no difference between them. When deluded, one is on this shore; when awakened, one is on the other shore. If one knows that mind is empty and sees no characteristics, one is free of delusion and awakening. Once free of delusion and awakening, there is no other shore either. The Tathāgata is not on this shore, nor on the other shore, nor in midstream. Midstream refers to adherents of the two vehicles; this shore refers to ordinary beings; the other shore is bodhi.

The Buddha has three bodies: the nirmāṇakāya, sambhogakāya, and dharmakāya. The nirmāṇakāya is also called the responsive body. When sentient beings constantly perform good deeds, this is the nirmāṇakāya; when they cultivate wisdom, this is the sambhogakāya; when they awaken to non-contrivance, this is the dharmakāya. The Buddha who constantly appears, flies throughout the ten directions, and rescues beings according to what is fitting is the nirmāṇakāya Buddha. Severing delusions and attaining the Way in the Snow Mountains is the sambhogakāya Buddha. Wordless and speechless, doing nothing and attaining nothing, serene and abiding forever—this is the dharmakāya Buddha. But in terms of ultimate principle, even one Buddha does not exist; how then could there be three? The three bodies are spoken of only in accordance with people's wisdom.

People are spoken of as having superior, middling, and lesser capacities. People of lesser wisdom falsely arouse the power of merit and falsely see the nirmāṇakāya Buddha. People of middling wisdom falsely sever afflictions and falsely see the sambhogakāya Buddha. People of superior wisdom falsely realize bodhi and falsely see the dharmakāya Buddha. People of supreme wisdom inwardly illuminate perfect quiescence: realizing the mind, they are Buddha. Without relying on mind, they attain Buddha-wisdom and know that the three bodies and all phenomena can neither be grasped nor spoken of. This is the liberated mind, and it accomplishes the

great Way. A sūtra says, “The Buddha does not teach the Dharma, does not liberate sentient beings, and does not realize bodhi.” This is what it means.

Sentient beings create karma; karma does not create sentient beings. If one creates karma in this life, one receives retribution in future lives, and there is no time of release. Only a realized person creates no karma in this very body and therefore receives no retribution. A sūtra says, “When no karma is created, one naturally attains the Way.” How could this be empty talk? People can create karma, but karma cannot create people. If people create karma, karma and people arise together; if people do not create karma, karma and people perish together. Thus we know that karma is created by people, and people are born through karma. If people do not create karma, karma has no means to give birth to people. It is also like people being able to propagate the Way, while the Way cannot propagate people.

Ordinary people today often create karma yet falsely claim that there is no retribution. How could they suffer even the least little? If, on the basis of the present mind, one reckons the karma created by a previous mind and the retribution received by a later mind, when could there be release? If the previous mind does not create karma, the later mind receives no retribution; how then can one falsely conceive of karmic retribution? A sūtra says, “Though one believes that there is a Buddha, if one says that the Buddha underwent ascetic suffering, this is called wrong view. Though one believes that there is a Buddha, if one says that the Buddha received retribution in the form of a golden spear and horse feed, this is called incomplete faith; this is called an icchantika.”

One who understands the Dharma of the sages is called a sage; one who understands the dharmas of ordinary beings is called an ordinary person. But if one can abandon the dharmas of ordinary beings and turn toward the Dharma of the sages, then an ordinary person becomes a sage. Foolish people in the world merely wish to seek sages afar and do not believe that the mind of wisdom and understanding is itself the sage. A sūtra says, “Do not speak this sūtra among those without wisdom.” A sūtra also says, “Mind is Dharma; those without wisdom do not believe in this mind.” Understanding the Dharma makes one a sage. Yet people merely wish to seek learning externally; they admire such things as luminous Buddha-images in the sky, fragrances, and forms. All this falls into wrong view and leads to the loss of one’s mind and to madness.

A sūtra says, “If one sees all appearances as non-appearances, one sees the Tathāgata.” The eighty-four thousand dharma gates all arise from the one mind. If the characteristics of mind are inwardly pure, like empty space, one is liberated from body and mind. The eighty-four thousand afflictions are the root of illness. Ordinary beings grieve at birth and fear death; when full, they worry about hunger. All this is called great delusion. Therefore, sages do not scheme about what lies ahead, do not

worry about what lies behind, do not cling to the present, and in every thought return to the Way. If one has not awakened to this great principle, one must promptly seek the wholesome paths of humans and devas, lest both be lost.

Verses on Sitting in Meditation at Night

At the first watch, sit upright in lotus posture; / Serenely compose the spirit in still illumination, dissolving into the same emptiness. / Throughout vast kalpas, there has originally been neither arising nor ceasing; / Why need one extinguish arising and ceasing to reach extinction without remainder?

All dharmas are like illusions; / Their intrinsic nature is empty—why need they be removed? / If one recognizes that mind-nature has no form or image, / Serene and unmoving, it is naturally suchness.

At the second watch, concentrate the spirit until it becomes ever clearer and purer; / Without stirring memories or thoughts, be one with true nature. / The myriad forms of the universe all return to emptiness; / Yet clinging to existence or emptiness is still an illness.

All dharmas are originally neither empty nor existent; / Ordinary beings, in deluded thought, debate wrong and right. / If one can hold neither of the two in one's mind, / Who can say that an ordinary being is not a sage?

At the third watch, the mind is pure and equal to empty space; / It pervades the ten directions, with nothing it does not penetrate. / Mountains, rivers, rocks, and walls cannot obstruct it; / Worlds as numerous as the sands of the Ganges are within it.

The intrinsic nature of worlds is the nature of suchness; / Nor is there any absence of nature—it is all-inclusive. / This is not so only for all Buddhas; / All classes of sentient beings are the same.

At the fourth watch, there is neither cessation nor arising; / Its measure is equal to empty space and the dharma realm. / There is no going or coming, no arising or ceasing; / Neither existent nor nonexistent, neither dark nor bright.

Giving rise to no views is the Tathāgata's view; / Having no name that can be named is the true Buddha-name. / Only those who awaken can recognize it; / Sentient beings who have not understood are like the blind.

At the fifth watch, prajñā illuminates without limit; / Without a single thought arising, it traverses the three thousand worlds. / If you wish to see the equal nature of suchness, / Take care not to give rise to mind—then it is directly before you.

The wondrous principle is profound and mysterious, beyond the mind's measure; / Do not seek after it until you are exhausted. / If you can be without thoughts, this is true seeking; / But if there is further seeking, you still do not recognize it.

End of Bodhidharma's Treatise on Awakening to the Nature