

CHAN Flag Moves or Wind Moves

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Good morning!

Hui Neng was born in 638, in Xin Zhou, Ling Nan. It's said that when he was born, two strange monks came to visit him and gave him the name Hui Neng. Hui Neng's last name was Lu. His father originally was an official in Fan Yang and for some reason, he was exiled to Xin Zhou. Hui Neng's father died when Hui Neng was three years old. Hui Neng and his mother moved to Nan Hai, Guang Zhou later and made a living by selling firewood.

One day, Hui Neng was selling wood on the street. Somebody bought the wood and asked Hui Neng to send the wood to a certain place. There, he heard someone was reading something which touched his heart. It seemed familiar to him and he could understand the meaning between words even though he did not learn any words before. He walked up and asked that person what he was reading. That person told him that he was reading the Diamond Sutra. That person also told Hui Neng that the 5th Patriarch, Hong Ren, was giving teachings on the Diamond Sutra in Ping Wu Mountain, Huang Mei and Hui Neng decided to visit the 5th Patriarch. After Hui Neng settled down his mother, he then started his journey to pursue Dharma.

Hui Neng lived in Ling Nan since childhood and did not know a single word. He was small and looked just like the mountain woodcutter. So, when the 5th Patriarch saw him, he called Hui Neng Ge Lao.

The 5th patriarch asked Hui Neng, "Where are you from?"

Hui Neng answered, "I came from Ling nan."

The 5th Patriarch asked, "What do you want to do here?"

Hui Neng answered, "I am here to become a Buddha, nothing else."

The 5th Patriarch said, "You came from Ling Nan. How could you become a Buddha?"

Hui Neng answered, "Though people could be differentiated by the places they came from, the Buddha nature has no difference. I may look different from you, Master, but what's the difference between our Buddha nature?"

When the 5th patriarch heard this, he knew that Hui Neng had good root, not a normal person. He wanted to talk to him more. But because all his disciples were around, he was afraid that they might be jealous of Hui Neng, so he sent him to pestle room to work there.

Pounding rice was hard work. Hui Neng was short and not heavy enough. So, he tied up a stone around his waist. In this way, he kept working in the pestle room for eight months.

One day, the 5th patriarch called his disciples together and said to them, "Birth and Death is a big thing. The impermanence often comes unexpectedly. I am old and it's time to look for a successor so that the Dharma could be carried forward. The Buddha Dharma is inconceivable and the important thing is to practice yourself. Don't think that it's enough just to remember what I have said. Go back and write a verse to show what you have achieved. If somebody understands the Buddha's meaning, I will then transmit the Dharma Robe to him and he will be the 6th patriarch.

At that time, the 5th Patriarch has over 700 disciples. Venerable Shen Xiu was pre-eminent among them. Shen Xiu was the Master and was good at internal and external studies and he often expounded sutras to the public. The 5th Patriarch thought high of him and all disciples respected him. So, after the gathering, they said, “For the title of the 6th Patriarch, nobody but Venerable Shen Xiu could bear it. We don’t have to waste our time to write verses. We just need to follow him after he gets the Dharma Robe.

After Shen Xiu heard their discussion, he thought, “They don’t dare to write verses because I am their Master. I should submit a verse to the Patriarch. Of course, submitting a verse is to pursue Dharma, not to compete for the title of Patriarch. If I don’t submit a verse to the Patriarch, how would he know where I am and how could he transmit the Dharma to me?” Back and forth, over and over, after two or three days, Shen Xiu finally wrote a verse. When the night was deep and everyone was sleeping, he wrote the verse on the corridor wall secretly. The verse said,

“The body is the Bodhi tree,

And the heart is the mirror table.

Dust them often,

And don’t invite dirt to stain.”

The next morning, when the 5th Patriarch passing by, he saw this verse and knew that it was written by Shen Xiu. This verse did not see the self-nature, however, if people followed this verse to practice, they still could benefit a lot and avoid falling to the evil realms. So, the 5th Patriarch appraised this verse in front of all the disciples and asked them to light incense, recite this verse and practice according to this verse. However,

privately, the 5th Patriarch still told Shen Xiu, “Your verse did not see the self-nature. Your understanding is not there yet, still outside of the door. To look for the supreme Bodhi with such a view, it is impossible. The supreme Bodhi needs to be obtained through knowing the self-heart and seeing the self-nature in the present moment.” That said, the 5th Patriarch asked Shen Xiu to write a verse again. However, several days passed, and Shen Xiu could not write another verse.

One day, Hui Neng was pounding rice in the pestle room. He heard someone reciting a verse outside, so he asked about it. The little sami told Hui Neng the whole story. Hui Neng pleaded with him, “Please, I want to recite the verse too. I want to know the Venerable Shen Xiu too. Since I came here, I have always been pounding rice. In over eight months, I did not go to the front. Please lead me to the corridor so I can worship the verse.”

So, the little sami brought Hui Neng to the verse. Hui Neng said, “I don’t know a word, please read for me.” At that time, an officer whose name was Riyong Zhang was nearby and he recited the verse for Hui Neng.

After Hui Neng listened to it, he said, “I also have a verse, please write it down for me.” The officer was surprised to hear that and he asked, “You are just a rice pounder. You could write a verse? It’s rare!” Hui Neng said seriously, “To learn the supreme Bodhi, don’t look down on the beginners. A man of low standing may have high wisdom. A man of high standing may have lower mind. If you look down on people, then you would create sin.” After the officer heard this, he said instantly, “Recite your verse and I will write for you. If one day you obtain the Dharma, don’t forget to transform me first.” So, Hui Neng recited his verse,

“The Bodhi originally is not a tree,

And the mirror table is not a table.

Originally there is nothing,

Then how could the dirt be invited?”

The disciples were shocked. The 5th Patriarch was afraid that somebody might harm Hui Neng, so he wiped the verse off with his shoe and said, “This verse also did not see the nature.”

The next day, the 5th Patriarch came to the pestle room and saw the stone tied at Hui Neng’s waist. He said, “People who pursue Dharma need to forget their flesh body, just like what you are doing now.” He then asked, “Is the rice done pounding?” Hui Neng said, “It’s done for a long time, waiting to be sieved.”

The 5th Patriarch then knocked the pestle head three times with the monk cane and left. Hui Neng understood the Patriarch’s meaning. So, at midnight that evening, he secretly went to see the 5th Patriarch. The 5th Patriarch covered Hui Neng up with his kasaya and started to expound the Diamond Sutra. When he said, “Develop a mind that abides nowhere”, Hui Neng suddenly awakened. All dharmas do not depart from the self-nature. Hui Neng pleasantly expressed himself,

“Who would have thought that the self-nature is intrinsically pure!

Who would have thought that the self-nature is intrinsically free from birth and death!

Who would have thought that the self-nature is intrinsically self-sufficient!

Who would have thought that the self-nature is intrinsically free from moving!

Who would have thought that all dharmas are born from the self-nature!”

The 5th Patriarch knew that Hui Neng enlightened, so he transmitted the “Sudden School” dharma door and the dharma robe to Hui Neng and said, “All Buddha are born to the worlds for one reason, which is to transform and instruct living beings according to small or big conditions. However, the supreme subtle Dharma, the secret and perfect Dharma, the true Proper Dharma Eye-Treasury was bestowed upon Maha Kasyapa. The 28th Patriarch Bodhidharma brought it to this land and today I transmit the Dharma and the Dharma robe to you. Protect it well and do not let it end. Listen to my verse,
“Sentient beings who sow the seeds of enlightenment
In the field of Causation will reap the fruit of Buddhahood.
Inanimate objects void of Buddha-nature
Sow not and reap not.”

Later, the 5th Patriarch sent Hui Neng to Jiu Jiang station. Before Hui Neng left, he advised Hui Neng, “Buddha Dharma will thrive from you. In three years after you leave Huang Mei, I will enter nirvana. Go south and protect yourself well. Do not rush to come out to propagate Dharma. You will go through some difficulties.”

Hui Neng bowed to the 5th Patriarch one more time and started his journey to the south. To avoid unexpected things, he stayed with a group of hunters for 15 years. Later, when the time was right, Hui Neng came to Fa Xing temple in Guang Zhou.

At that time, the Venerable Yin Zong was teaching Nirvana Sutra. In the assembly, a flag was moving when the wind blew and two little monks entered into an argument. One little monk said, “The flag is moving.” The other little monk said, “The wind is moving.” Hui Neng heard their argument and said, “It’s neither the flag moving, nor the wind moving. It’s your mind moving.” Hui Neng’s words electrified all the listeners.

Of course, the Venerable Yin Zong is not a common person. He walked off his Dharma seat and bowed to Hui Neng and asked, “Are you the legendary practitioner?”

Hui Neng nodded and showed the Dharma robe to Venerable Yin Zong. Venerable Yin Zong was very careful and did not want to believe easily. So, he asked, “What unique secret did the 5th Patriarch transmit to you?”

Hui Neng said, “No secret. He only talked about seeing the self-nature. He did not say anything about meditation and liberation.”

Venerable Yin Zong asked again, “Why didn’t he talk about meditation and liberation?”

Hui Neng answered, “Meditation and liberation are dharmas that can be pursued and to be pursued. They are not Buddha Dharma.”

Venerable Yin Zong asked again, “What is the one and only Dharma door of Buddha Dharma?”

Hui Neng answered, “The Buddha nature.”

Venerable Yin Zong bowed instantly and said, “When expounding Buddha sutras, we are as shallow as the bricks and mud, while your Dharma talking is like gold!”

Hui Neng stayed in Fa Xing temple for one year and then he went to Bao Lin temple and gave Dharma talk there for 36 years.

From the 6th Patriarch Hui Neng, one flower five leaves, Chan Buddhism became prosperous and all the dharma realms are full of its fragrance.