

The Dunhuang version of the *Platform Sutra* (sections 12-19), Philip J. Ivanhoe, tr.

The following is my translation of selections from the central part of the text along with some notes and brief commentary on most of these selections. Notes follow immediately after each section and are indented; any commentary follows and is marked.

(12) ...Good and learned friends, perfect understanding and insight are inherently within each person. But because of the delusion of their (conditioned) minds, they are unable to attain self-enlightenment. They must seek out a great and learned friend who will show them the way and help them see their true nature. Good and learned friends, enlightenment *is* the completion of wisdom.

Commentary: Here we see the turn away from reliance on one's "own power" (*zili* 自力), characteristic of early Buddhism, toward a reliance on "other power" (*tali* 他力), characteristic of Mahayana. But reminiscent of much within the Chinese tradition, the aid one requires comes from a teacher not a savior; it is not the grace of a Buddha (e.g. Amitabha) or the compassion of a Bodhisattva.

(13) Good and learned friends, this teaching of mine takes stability and insight as its basis. Never be deluded into saying that insight and stability are separate. Stability and insight are a single substance—not two. Stability is the substance of insight; insight is the function of stability. Where there is insight, stability is within the insight. Where there is stability, insight is within the stability. Good and learned friends, this is the principle of the identity of stability and insight.

Students of the Way take heed! Do not say that stability precedes and gives rise to insight or that insight precedes and gives rise to stability. This is to regard stability and insight as separate. Those who embrace such a view profess a dualistic teaching. If what one says is good but one's mind is not good, there is no identity of insight and stability. If one's mind and what one says both are good, then internal and external are one, and there is identity of stability and insight. The practice of self-enlightenment does not lie in verbal arguments. If one argues about which comes first (stability or insight) one will never settle the matter. Instead, one will generate (false notions) of things and the self and will never escape the Four States.¹

Commentary: The central issue in this section is the relationship between "stability" (*ding* 定) and "insight" (*hui* 慧). This is an important debate within Buddhist thought and practice (it mirrors the tension between "quietism" and "activism" discussed in the commentary to section 18 below). Basically, some Buddhists tend to describe the goal of their practice as attaining and maintaining complete meditative calm (Sanskrit: *samadhi*). Critics of such a view argue that this can become a selfish desire in its own right and can lead to insentience or even death (see the warnings about "cutting off thoughts" in section 17 below). Instead, these critics advocate cultivating a saving "insight" (Sanskrit: *prajna*)

¹ Birth, sickness, old age and death.

into the true nature of self and world, as the path to liberation. The *Platform Sutra* insists that these are simply two aspects of the enlightened mind.

The Chinese make an important distinction between “substance” (*ti* 體) and “function” (*yong* 用). To say that two things are one substance means that though logically distinct, they cannot actually exist independent of one another (Aristotle makes a similar distinction between convex and concave surfaces). Thus on the Chinese view, a lighted lamp and lamplight are one substance (see section 15 below). The notion of function has a normative dimension as well. A thing’s function is its natural, appropriate operation or use (See Angus C. Graham, *Two Chinese Philosophers*, pp. 39-40).

The primary message of this section is that right practice is the goal. This is similar to Suzuki’s refrain in *Zen Mind/Beginner’s Mind*. In this section, particularly in the final line, we see a clear statement of the text’s soteriological concern (escape from *samsara*).

(14) Universal *samadhi* is to act with straightforward mind at all times: in motion or at rest, sitting or lying down. The *Vimalakirti-nirdesa Sutra* says, “Straightforward mind is the field of the Way. Straightforward mind is the Pure Land.” Do not falsely flatter the true Way by paying lip service to straightforwardness. One who talks about universal *samadhi* but does not practice straightforward mind is not a disciple of the Buddha. Only the practice of straightforward mind—not clinging to any attachments—can be called universal *samadhi*.

Deluded individuals are attached to phenomena,² they cling to universal *samadhi* and to the notion that straightforward mind is sitting motionless, eliminating delusions and not allowing thoughts to arise. They think this is universal *samadhi*. But if one follows this kind of practice, one becomes like an insentient thing. In fact, this kind of practice is an impediment to the Way. The Way must be allowed to flow freely. Why would one impede it? As long as the mind does not abide in phenomena, the Way flows freely. If the mind abides, then it is fettered. If sitting motionless (constitutes right practice) it would have been wrong for Vimalakirti to scold Sariputra for sitting in the forest.³

Good and learned friends, I have also seen those who teach people to sit viewing the mind and viewing purity, to remain motionless and to not allow thoughts to arise. Exerting themselves in this manner, deluded individuals fail to become enlightened and clinging to this (method) can even cause them to go insane. There have been several hundred cases in which this has happened. Therefore to teach in this way is a grave mistake.

² “Phenomena” is my translation for the Chinese character 相 *xiang*, which is often translated as “mark” in other contexts. It is that by which we take a thing to be the thing it is, something like a given thing’s defining characteristic. As you might imagine, in Buddhist material, this has a strong negative connotation. (Cf. the terms *dharma* and “environment” discussed in notes 4 and 7 respectively)

³ This refers to an incident described in the *Vimalakirti-nirdesa Sutra*. This is the single most important text for understanding the Platform Sutra. I recommend the translation by Robert Thurman.

Commentary: In this section we again see the claim that right practice *is* wisdom and enlightenment. We also see the first but not the last warning against heresies; these help us both to understand certain doctrinal issues and to appreciate the text's polemical dimensions. Wrong teachings not only do not help, they do positive and pernicious harm. This makes good sense. If the problem with us is wrong-headed thinking, the more systematic our wrong-headed thinking and the more tightly we embrace it, the lower our spiritual state and the more difficult our self-cultivation. Some teachings—e.g. Shenxiu's verse—are less harmful, they enable one to get rid of bad karma but must be abandoned if one is to achieve enlightenment.

(15) Good and learned friends, in what way are stability and insight an identity? (They are an identity) in the same way that a lamp and its light (are an identity). Where there is a lamp, there is light. Without the lamp there is no light. The lamp is the substance of the light; the light is the function of the lamp. Though they are two, they are not two in substance. Stability and insight are like this.

(16) Good and learned friends, in the *dharma*⁴ there is no sudden or gradual. (However,) among people there are those with heightened spiritual capacity and those with low spiritual capacity.⁵ Deluded individuals pursue the gradual (method). Enlightened individuals cultivate suddenly. To realize one's original mind is to see one's original nature. Those who are enlightened realize that from the very start there is not the slightest difference.⁶ Those who are unenlightened remain forever in the cycle of transmigration.

Commentary: The *Platform Sutra* advocates only sudden enlightenment but what this means is not particularly clear (at least to those of us who remain unenlightened). The sutra says that the only kind of practice one should engage in is the practice of enlightenment, i. e. *being* enlightened. One should not simply practice *becoming* enlightened for this would be like taking as one's goal studying rather than mastering a discipline (e.g. to aim at continually practicing but never playing the violin). However, because people have different karmic inheritances, their individual practice must be tailored to their particular capacities (one of the primary reasons for the central role of the teacher). But such "sudden practice" seems to amount to a kind of gradual method, designed to remove bad karma. (Consider the practice of the disciples of the fifth patriarch as described in the text.)

⁴ *Dharma* this Sanskrit word is translated 法 *fa* in Chinese. It often refers to Buddhist teachings or the Way in general, but its more technical senses include an object of consciousness or consciousness itself. (Cf. the terms "phenomenon" and "environment" discussed in notes 2 and 7 respectively)

⁵ Literary: "there are those who are keen and those who are dull." This refers to the different spiritual states individuals are in as a result of past karmic inheritance.

⁶ That is, between the original mind and original nature of those who follow the sudden method and those who follow the gradual method.

The sudden practice does not guarantee everyone immediate enlightenment (the sutra never makes such a claim), but it is the only way to realize enlightenment. Other kinds of practice will never bring one to enlightenment because such practices require one to add something to one's innate enlightenment. The sudden practice deepens one's awareness and allows one to see more clearly, by removing the impediments of obscuring delusions, until, in a flash, one actually *is* enlightened. The final step is when the inherent Buddha nature shines forth, unimpeded and hence unblemished. This is self-enlightenment (often mentioned in the text); it comes from within. In some ways it is like finding one's way out of a profound form of self-deception.

This helps us to understand the fifth patriarch's reaction to the verses of Shenxiu and Huineng. Shenxiu's verse is not wrong; it won't lead people astray. But in itself it will not lead them to enlightenment (though it will help them to prepare for enlightenment). Huineng's verse is superior to Shenxiu's not because it *explains* how one should practice or what enlightenment is but because it *exhibits* Huineng's enlightenment. The Zen tradition is one of enlightened teachers not good expositors or careful analyzers of propositions.

The last line is aimed against those who just seek to improve their karmic inheritance and enhance future rebirths. This itself is a karma generating desire and will work to keep one within *samsara*.

Carl Bielefeldt reads this section as a strong put down of the Northern School and its gradual method of cultivation. This polemical interpretation was first advanced by Hu Shih and is part of his account of Shenhui. I do not believe that the polemical aspect is quite as strong as they claim it is (at least in the core of the sutra). The gradual method is inadequate. However, the *Platform Sutra* advocates that one should not become obsessed with putting it down, just get it right. (See the end of section 18 for some remarks that I believe support this reading).

(17) Good and learned friends, this teaching of mine, has been handed down from long ago and all (who have taught it) have taken no-thought as its cardinal doctrine, no-phenomena as its substance and non-abiding as its basis. (What do we mean by these?) No-phenomena is to be among phenomena yet separate from them. No-thought is to have thoughts yet not think them. Non-abiding is the fundamental nature of human beings.

Successive thoughts should not abide. Past, present and future thoughts should succeed one another without being cut off. If a single thought is cut off, the Dharma Body separates from the physical body. As successive thoughts arise, they should not abide in any *dharmā*. If a single thought abides, then successive thoughts will abide. This is called being fettered. If succeeding thoughts do not abide in any *dharmā* then there will be no fettering. This is to take non-abiding as the basis.

Good and learned friends, (no-phenomena means) to separate from all phenomena. Just be able to separate from all phenomena and the substance of your nature (will remain) clean and pure. This is why we take no-phenomena as the substance.

To remain unstained in every environment⁷ is called no-thought. In one's thoughts, one should separate from every environment and not give rise to thoughts of

⁷ "Environment" is my translation for the Chinese character 境 *jing*. It refers to the objects of perception (sometimes including a sixth sense—mental perception). The aggregate of the objects of each of our senses

any *dharma*. If one stops thinking about everything, one will eliminate all thoughts. (But) if even a single thought is cut off, one will die and be reborn somewhere else. Followers of the Way take heed! Do not be obsessed with thoughts of the *dharma*. It is bad enough if you yourself go astray. (But) to lead others into delusion, unaware of one's own delusion, is to slander the sutras and the *dharma*. This is why no-thought is the cardinal doctrine (of our teaching). Deluded individuals have thoughts about their environment and based upon these thoughts, they generate false views. All passions and erroneous thoughts arise in this way. This is why no-thought is taught as the cardinal doctrine of this teaching.

People of the world! Separate yourselves from phenomena and do not generate thoughts. If one is without (such) thoughts then even (the thought of) no-thought will not be established. What (thoughts) should one be without? What are (true) thoughts? To be (without) thoughts is to be separate from all the passions of dualism. Thusness is the substance of thought and thought is the function of Thusness. If thoughts arise from one's true nature, then one's seeing, hearing and sensing will be unstained in every environment and one's (true) self will always be present. The *Vimalakirti-nirveda Sutra* says, "Externally, skillfully distinguishing the phenomena of various *dharmas*. Internally, remaining unmoved within the first principle."

Commentary: The central message of this section is that one is not to cut off thoughts. This is to "add something to the mind" and corrupt its original nature. Rather, one is to allow Thusness (i.e. Buddha nature) to function spontaneously. (Compare section 14: do not become an insentient thing, let the Way flow freely).

The separation of the Dharma Body (*Dharmakaya*) from the physical body (*rupakaya*) is an oblique reference to death (which is made explicit a bit further on in this section). These two "bodies" are two aspects of the Buddha. Given our form as human beings, the only way we can manifest Buddha-hood is to realize both these aspects of the Buddha, together. There is a helpful discussion of this in Geshe Rabten, *Echoes of Voidness*, p. 21.

"Followers take heed!"—is another warning against heresy. It is bad enough if one practices this (wrong) teaching oneself, worse still if one leads others astray with it. Not only will you fail to help them (for if they succeed in "cutting off thoughts" they will die and simply be reborn and hence will still be in *samsara*) but in the process you slander the *dharma* and the sutras. This leads to direct rebirth in a particularly nasty Buddhist hell. Again we see the soteriological goal—escape from *samsara*—as a central theme in the text.

In the final paragraph, the *Platform Sutra*, like the *Vimalakirti-nirveda Sutra*, is saying that one must be in the world but not of it. We must make effort, but only of the right sort (like a fly in a spider's web). To try to flee the world is simply to indulge a futile, selfish and karma generating desire. The proper life is found in the "middle way," in neither complacency nor struggle. One is to allow one's inherent, pure Buddha nature to function spontaneously, regardless of where one is.

in turn constitutes a "field" or "environment." (Cf. the terms "phenomenon" and *dharma* discussed in notes 2 and 4 respectively)

(18) Good and learned friends, in this teaching, sitting in meditation has never involved viewing the mind or viewing purity, nor (does this teaching) say one should remain motionless. Suppose one advocates viewing the mind. (Such a) mind is, from the very start, a delusion. And since delusions are illusory there is really nothing to view. Suppose one advocates viewing purity. (But) one's nature, in itself, is pure. Only because of deluded thoughts is Thusness covered over and obscured. Apart from deluded thoughts, the nature is pure. If one does not see the fundamental purity of one's own nature and instead stirs up one's mind to view purity, this will only generate delusions of purity. This delusion is without a basis (in reality), therefore we know that those who view it are viewing a delusion. Purity lacks a phenomenal form, yet some establish a phenomenal form of purity and call this (right) practice. Those who do this obstruct their own fundamental nature and end up being fettered by purity.

If one is motionless, one does not take note of the errors and faults of others. This is the nature (being) motionless. Deluded individuals keep their physical bodies motionless, but as soon as they open their mouths, they speak of the right and wrong others have done. (This is to) stray from and turn one's back on the Way. Viewing the mind and viewing purity are in fact great obstructions to the Way.

Commentary: In this section we see themes that are common throughout the sutra. The *Platform Sutra* is often reminiscent of the “middle path” of Madhyamika in its notion of emptiness and even in its use of a kind of negative dialectic. (See Richard H. Robinson and Willard L. Johnson, *The Buddhist Religion* p. 70-71). One is not to seek a forced quietude, but one is to avoid attachment to phenomena.

Carl Bielefeldt sees an inherent tension in the text between (1) viewing one's nature (quietism) and (2) acting out Buddhist virtues in the world (activism). He sees this more vividly than I do (though I find these very helpful heuristic categories). It seems to me that the text is just insisting that we see our innate purity in our spontaneous, everyday actions—“hauling firewood and carrying water.” Such a view relies on a very strong assumption about the innate purity of an inherent (Buddha) mind or nature. Daoists and Neo-Confucians make similar and equally strong assumptions (though they fill in the content, i.e. the inherent structure and direction, of our inherent nature in very different ways). The tension Carl points to is seen, for example, in the *Platform Sutra*'s use of the mind-as-mirror metaphor (a metaphor it inherited from Zhuangzi and which it shares with many Neo-Confucians). We are urged to make our minds like a mirror: calm and unattached, reflecting but not storing. A mirror is “calm” and “unattached,” it accurately reflects the world without retaining images of what it reflects (which would then distort its future “functioning”). But mirrors do not act. An enlightened Buddhist's “reflections” of the world entail acting in it in characteristic ways. (I talk about this same problem in regard to Wang Yangming in my book on Mengzi and Wang).

The text emphasizes the lively, spontaneous character of the Buddha nature. Like their use of the mind-as-mirror metaphor, this strikes me as distinctively Chinese, generally Daoist, and specifically Zhuangzian.

(19) Now that we know this to be the case, what do we, who follow this teaching, call “sitting meditation?” In our teaching, (sitting meditation) is to be completely without obstructions. Externally, not to allow thoughts to go out to any environment is “to sit.” (Internally), to see one’s original nature and maintain one’s composure is “to meditate.” What do we call meditative stability? Externally, to separate from phenomena is meditation. Internally, to maintain one’s composure is stability. If externally there is some phenomenon, internally one’s nature remains composed.

Fundamentally, one is pure and stable. Only when one is affected by the environment is one’s composure upset. If one separates from phenomena and maintains one’s composure, then there is stability. Externally, to separate from phenomena is meditation. When internally (and externally) one maintains one’s composure, there is stability. Externally meditating and internally stable---therefore we call it “meditative stability.” The *Vimalakirti-nirdesa Sutra* says, “Suddenly and completely, one regains one’s original mind.” The *Discipline of the Bodhisattva* says, “Fundamentally, one’s nature is clean and pure.” Good and learned friends, see your own nature and your own purity. Cultivate and practice your own nature. If you yourself put into practice the Dharma Body and you yourself carry out the practice of the Buddha, then you yourself will perfect the Buddhist Way.