



What is the Essence of Buddhism?

佛法中要緊的地方

A Dharma talk given by Dr. Martin Verhoeven, Dean of Academics at Dharma Realm Buddhist University
on May 13, 2019 in the Buddha Hall at City of Ten Thousand Buddhas,

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法界佛教大學教務長魏果廷博士2019年5月13日開示於萬佛聖城大殿
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I want to start with a scripture we are all probably familiar with, which is the *Platform Sutra* by the Sixth Patriarch Huineng. In this text, he had an awakening that occurred to him as he listened to a man outside of a store recite a line from the *Vajra Sutra*: “Let the mind be unattached, clinging to nothing.” 「應無所住，而生其心。」 Immediately upon hearing this, Sixth Patriarch Huineng had a wonderful understanding that led him to put down everything and go find where he could learn about this.

In our Hermeneutics class, as we were studying this sutra, students had questions about his cultivation process. When the Sixth Patriarch heard the line, “Let the mind be unattached, clinging to nothing”, he had an awakening experience and went to the monastery where the Fifth Patriarch Hongren resided and took refuge with him. Patriarch Hongren sent him to work behind the kitchen, basically splitting firewood and hulling rice. Patriarch Huineng didn't go to the library, and couldn't, because he was illiterate. He spent very little time in the Buddha Hall. He mainly worked, and did this for eight months, just splitting firewood and hulling rice. And at the end of those eight months, the Fifth Patriarch asked him, “Is the rice ready yet?” And Patriarch Huineng said, “It's long been ready; it's only waiting for the sieve.” At that point, the Fifth Patriarch invited him to his room at night and began to lecture to him (or just read to him the *Vajra Sutra*). And when he came to that line, “Let the mind be unattached, clinging to nothing.” Patriarch Huineng had an incredibly profound awakening.

And so, the students asked, “What's the change?” The line

我想從大家熟悉的一段經文切入，這是出自六祖惠能大師的《六祖壇經》。經文中，六祖大師站在一家店門外，聽到有人誦讀這句「應無所住，而生其心」，當下隨即明白，遂放下一切，尋找學法之處。

附帶一提，當我們在詮釋學課堂上學習這段經文的時候，學生們提出的一個問題是，六祖大師聽到「應無所住，而生其心」而有一次開悟的經驗。他到五祖弘忍大師的道場皈依學習，五祖卻分配他到廚房後頭去做劈柴、舂米的工作。因為六祖目不識丁，無法讀寫，也不能上圖書館。惠能很少上佛殿，大部分的時間都在做工，這樣做了八個月之後，五祖就問他：「米熟也未？」惠能就回答：「米熟久矣！猶欠篩在。」於是，五祖就邀請惠能到他的方丈室，教導他（或者只是為他讀金剛經）。當惠能聽到《金剛經》裡的這句「應無所住，而生其心」，當下即大徹大悟。

學生們在課堂上提問——「到底是什麼改變了？」「應無所住，而生其心」這句話完全相同，經過了八個月的時間，經文

was exactly the same: “Let the mind be unattached, clinging to nothing.” Eight months later, here the very same line, (the Sutra hasn’t changed), and yet Patriarch Huineng’s experience of this was profoundly different. So “What changed?” What was the cultivation that he did that allowed the meaning of the text to come directly into his heart, where eight months earlier it hadn’t?

This question came up in a Hermeneutics class. Hermeneutics is concerned with how do you retrieve meaning from the text? How do you understand not only what the Buddha taught but why he taught it? What was he thinking? And it seemed from this example, the students were quick to point out that mere study doesn’t reveal that; there has to be some transformation in the person looking at the text for meaning to come through. The students were moving along the line that self-cultivation was a tool of retrieving meaning. It was not just the language, or just study, (even memorization), but there had to be an inner transformation for the meaning to come through. And this was from the example of Patriarch Huineng.

This goes back to a principle that Master Hua used with us early on, which essentially translates that: Study without practice is sterile, but practice without study is blind.

So, after Patriarch Huineng gained profound realization, he understood that everything was wholly complete, there was nothing lacking. The essential nature, 自性 (zìxìng), or 本性 (běnxìng), or just 性 (xìng), is universally available to all living beings. It is not greater in the Buddhas or lesser in human beings and so forth. He had this profound realization. He realized it because our essential nature is wholly complete, lacking nothing, and never had left us. Therefore, the teaching wasn’t so much to give Dharma, but to untie the obstructions or get rid of the impediments to that direct understanding. So, when he was asked by one of his disciples would he give them his teaching, he said, “I would be deceiving you to say I have a teaching to give you. Through this process, your essential nature will shine forth.”

Some people feel that the most interesting chapters in the *Platform Sutra*, or as I would call them “lively encounters” are the stories of Patriarch Huineng’s direct exchanges with the disciples.

沒有任何改變，但是惠能對經文的感受卻截然不同。因此，學生想知道：「到底什麼改變了？」這八個月裡，惠能到底在修行上下了什麼工夫，能夠讓經文的義理深入其心？

這個問題在法界大學「詮釋學」的課堂上被提出。「詮釋學」是關於如何探究經文義理？如何理解佛陀的教導、他的用意以及他的想法？從這個例子來看，學生們很快就指出，僅僅學習經文是無從得知惠能的轉變。因此，學生們以自身修行經驗做為檢索的工具。而非僅只在文字上學習(或者是記住經文)，而是由慧能大師的例子去發掘內在的轉變所帶來的改變。

這可以追溯到早期我們跟隨師父的學習方法，就是所謂的一一學而不修行，學佛無益；行而不解，盲修瞎煉。

當惠能有這樣深刻的認識後，他意識到我們的自性本自具足。像這樣的自性，所有的眾生皆有，與佛無別。這個自性從來就沒有離開過我們，是具足的。在這樣本性具足的觀念下，教導並不是給予佛法，而是解開障礙或是去除理解上的障礙。因此，當弟子問佛陀：「世尊有什麼法可以教導我們？」佛陀回答說：「如果我說有法可以教導你們，我是打了妄語。我所做的，只是把你的問題癥結解開，讓你的自性可以自然顯露出來。」

有些人認為《六祖壇經》最有趣的的就是惠能與登門求法的門徒們彼此對答的部分。他們不但背景不同，修行的法門也不同。有的是打坐參禪，有的專事背誦經典，有的甚至是要來取六祖大師的性命。六祖大師遇到這麼多的弟子，他的教導完全不同。他是根據不同的因緣將他們各自的問題癥結打開，有時這些教導看起來彼此衝突，每位弟子所接受的教導也不盡相

His disciples came from all backgrounds and different kinds of cultivation. Some of them were Chan, some of them memorized and recited Sutras, some of them were very strange, and one even came and tried to kill him and so forth. He gave a different teaching to each one of them as appropriate to their knots, their causes and conditions. And sometimes, these teachings seemed as if they contradicted each other, for the teaching given to one was very different from the one given to the other. To one he might teach emptiness, and to another he might teach existence.

He came back to the same point: there was no Dharma per se to give. All Dharmas are expedient, they are meant to untie knots. For example, we saw the same thing in the *Shurangama Sutra*, where the Buddha talked about knots and untied knots. A similar analogy is used in the *Lotus Sutra* where the metaphor was medicine and the Buddha was considered a skilled physician who dispensed medicine according to illness. And once the illness was cured, then there was no longer a need for the medicine. Different illnesses required different medicines; hence, you don't give chemotherapy to someone with a headache, and you don't give aspirin to someone with cancer. And so, it seemed as if they are different and maybe even contradictory, but from this deep review, they were completely appropriate and this is what 方便 (fāngbiàn), expedient means.

What I want to do now is to jump to something more contemporary. This goes back to probably 1975 or 1976. At that point I had come to the monastery, and was thinking about becoming a monk and spending a lot of time there. So, during that time, different people would come to visit, and I remember this one particular visit, which I want to use it to sort of get some thinking going about the follow: Just like what Sixth Patriarch said, the Buddha said in a Parable, "There's nothing to get but only expedient devices to untie and liberate what we already have." Then what did it mean to reach the other shore? In other words, what was the goal? Or even more closely, what was essence of the Dharma (of Buddha Dharma)? What was it for? What was it about? This was a question that I had at the time, and many people did. So, here's a story about 1975: a famous Buddhist scholar who came to Gold Mountain Monastery, which was located on 15th street at that time, a very rustic place. He gathered in the kitchen with Shifu, and the Master invited us all in to sit around. He asked Master Hua what's the essence of Buddhism.

The Master turned to the Scholar and said, "You know I'm just a country bumpkin; I don't know very much. My disciples, on the other hand, many of them are college-educated, some even have PhDs. I'll let them answer the question." So, the Master turned to us and said,

同。有的弟子可能是教「空」，有的可能是講「有」。

回到剛才我們提到一個概念：其實無法可教。所有這些教導，其實都是一種方便，都是去打開我們的癥結。《楞嚴經》有提到類似的概念，就是把我們的問題癥結打開。《法華經》也有相同的譬喻，各種的法門就像是藥，佛是一個高明的醫師，能夠對症下藥。病好了，就不再需要這些藥。不同的病需要使用不同的藥；頭痛的人不需要進行化療，癌症患者也不能服用阿司匹林。這些藥雖然看起來不同，但是從更深的角度來看，它們都是圓融無礙的，都是一種方便。

現在把時間拉回到現代，大概是在一九七五、一九七六年前後，那時我在金山寺待了很長一段時間，也考慮成為一名比丘。那段時間，我看到許多人登門求法，其中一位訪客很特別，可以用這個例子來對我們討論的主題進行一些思考。正如六祖大師和佛所說，其實無法可求，也無法可教，一切都只是幫助我們發現本有自性的方便法；那麼「到彼岸」又是什麼意思呢？換句話說，什麼是我們修行的目標？更確切的說，佛法的本質是什麼？為何而立？與何相關？當時，我和很多人一樣，心裡存有這個疑問。一九七五年有一位著名的佛教學者來到位於十五街舊的金山寺，那是一個很簡樸的地方。他和上人在廚房會面，上人要我們圍坐在他們身邊。這位學者就問上人：「佛教的本質是什麼？」

上人回答說：「其實呢，我只是個鄉下土包子，知道的也不多。我的弟子其實都比我有學問，有的甚至是博士。我讓他們來回答你的問題。」上人就轉頭看我們，問說：「佛教的本質是什麼？」有人回答：「智慧」，上人說：「不是」；另一個答：「慈悲」，上人說：「也不是」；有人說：「空性」，上人說：「不是」。有人講：「不執

“So what is the essence of Buddhism?” And one person responded, “Wisdom” 智慧 (zhìhuì), and the Master said, “No.” Another person responded, “(Great) Compassion” 大悲 (dàbēi), and the Master said, “No.” Someone said, “Emptiness, 空 (kōng).” “No.” I think I said, because we’re reading the *Six Patriarch Sutra* at that time, “Non-attachment” 無執著 (wúzhízhuó), and the Master said, “No.” And another monk who was interested in shentong 神通 (shéntōng) said, “Spiritual powers—that is the essence”, and the Master said, “Absolutely not.” And so, we went around like this and finally there was a young Shami (novice monk) about 11 years old or 12 years old there, named Guo Tong. Some of you may have heard of him; his mother is a Buddhist nun. And he always liked to win the contest; he always liked to be in the spotlight. So, he jumped forward, and said, “I know what the essence of Buddhism is: it is following the rules.” And the Master responded, “No.”

Guo Tong said to the Master, “So what is the essence of Buddhism?” And the Master said, “Change.” And he [Guo Tong] was stumped, and said, “But you told me: ‘follow the rules.’ And the Master said, “I told you that because unless you follow them, you would never change.”

The Master said, “What that means is if you’re a bad person, you have to become a good person, you have to change.” So, Guo Tong now engaged in this and said, “But what if you’re a good person?” The Master said, “You have to become a sage, an Arhat.” And so what if you are an Arhat? And then the Master said that you have to become a Bodhisattva. And then Guo Tong said, “Now if you become a Bodhisattva, ten-stage Bodhisattva, then what?” And the Master said, “Then you have to become a Buddha.” Then Guo Tong said, “So then when you become a Buddha, you can retire and relax a little bit?” And the Master said, “No, you have to become a Bodhisattva again, like Guanyin Bodhisattva, who was once a Buddha and then became a Bodhisattva.” And at that point, he went, “Ah...”

So, this principle, although the story is somewhat humorous, is pointing to this deep principle that change is the essence of the teaching. That there’s no place to dwell, no place to set up. Even at the stage of Buddha or Bodhisattva, you’re constantly engaged in the activity of changing living beings and changing yourself. By changing yourself you change living beings, and by changing living beings you cultivate yourself. This non-dual turning is what I take away from my experience with Master Hua. In other words, there isn’t anything to rest or attain, but merely a maintaining of your activity of teaching and through that the transforming revolves.

Amitabha ❀

著」，（我想那是我說的，因為當時我們正在讀《六祖壇經》）上人說：「不是」；一位對神通感興趣的比丘說：「神通就是佛教的本質」，上人說：「肯定不是」。我們這樣兜了一圈，最後一個年輕的沙彌，他的名字叫果童，當時他大約11歲或12歲。你們有些人可能聽過他，他的母親是一位比丘尼。他總是喜歡在比賽中獲勝，也喜歡成為眾所矚目的焦點。他向前跳起來說道：「我知道什麼是佛教的本質，就是守規矩。」上人回答：「不是！」

果童就問上人說：「那佛教的本質到底是什麼？」上人說：「改變。」果童愣了一下，對上人說：「可是您告訴我要守規矩。」上人回答：「我教你守規矩，就是要你肯聽話，否則你不會改變。」

上人接著說：「意思就是說，如果你是個壞人，你需要改變自己成為好人。」果童反問上人：「那好人要改變什麼呢？」上人就說：「可以繼續修行，變成聖賢、阿羅漢。」果童問：「那阿羅漢呢？」上人說：「可以變成菩薩。」果童問：「那菩薩呢？」上人回答：「可以變成十地的菩薩。」果童再問「那十地菩薩呢？要怎麼改變？」上人說：「可以成佛。」果童接著問：「成佛之後就可以退休，休息一陣子嗎？」上人說：「不對！成佛了之後又再變回菩薩，就像觀音菩薩一樣，曾經是佛，現在是菩薩。」果童聽完，說：「噢...」

這個故事有點幽默，但背後所包含的意思卻很深奧——教法的本質就是改變。無所住，也無所立。即使在佛陀或菩薩的果位上，也是要不斷的隨順眾生，改變自己。通過改變自己，來改變眾生；藉由改變眾生，而達到自我修行。這種不二的轉變概念是我從上人的教導中學到的。換句話說，沒有靜或是動，而是持續不斷的隨緣教化。

阿彌陀佛！❀