

Zen Masters *of* China

The First Step East

ZEN STORIES COLLECTED AND RETOLD BY
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The story of Dajian Huineng is one of the best known in the Zen tradition and is recorded in a document entitled *The Platform Sutra of the Sixth Patriarch*. This purports to be a transcript of statements made by Huineng from his seat on the platform in the meditation hall. It begins with his account of how he came to be Hongren's successor.

He tells his disciples that his father had been a disgraced government official who had died when Huineng was only three years old, leaving his wife and child in extreme poverty. Once the boy was old enough, he took on the responsibility of supporting his mother by gathering and selling firewood. As a commoner, he had no schooling, and, in the chronicles of Zen, stress is put on the fact that he was not able to read or write.

When he in his mid-twenties, he was going about his rounds and happened to hear a man chanting a sutra. Although Huineng was unfamiliar with the sutra, when he heard the phrase "let thought arise without resting it anywhere" he came to a deep spontaneous awakening. He asked the man what he was reciting and was told that it was the *Diamond Sutra*.

"How did you come by this sutra?" Huineng inquired.

"I visited the East Mountain Monastery," the man explained, "and the master there gave it to me."

"And who's that master?"

"He's Master Hongren, who is called the Fifth Patriarch, and he has one thousand monks studying with him. But he encourages even laypeople to recite this sutra so that they might realize their true nature, their Buddha-nature, for themselves. If you want to learn about this sutra, he's the man you should go to see."

Huineng was eager to visit the Fifth Patriarch, but he first needed to arrange for his mother's care. Fortunately, a villager who learned of his desire to travel to East Mountain provided him with a sum of money that ensured his mother's security. Once the appropriate arrangements had been made, he set out on the journey that took thirty days to complete.

The Fifth Patriarch received Huineng formally, asking his name and inquiring where he had come from. The young man replied that he was a commoner from Guangdong in the South and that he had come to East Mountain in order to attain Buddhahood.

The patriarch tested Huineng by asking: "How is it possible for someone like you to attain Buddhahood? Southerners are barbarians and don't have Buddha-nature."

Undeterred, Huineng responded: "There may be Southerners and there may be Northerners, but what has that to do with Buddha-nature?"

"You are a very clever barbarian," Hongren said. "But you aren't a monk, so you can't stay in the monastery. Report to the granary. You may begin work there."

The young man was put to work hulling rice and splitting firewood. It is said that he was so slight that he had to have a stone tied to his belt in order to give him enough weight to trample the rice.

He worked without any instruction from Hongren for eight months before the master came to see how he was doing. At that time, the patriarch confirmed Huineng's awakening. "Among the monks in this monastery there are none who have attained what you have attained," he added. "Instead of striving to open their mind's eye, they seek only to accumulate merit in hopes of obtaining a more auspicious rebirth in the future. If they heard that a layman, an illiterate lad at that, had achieved awakening, they wouldn't believe it, and they might do you harm. Or they might come to lose respect for the teachings of Buddhism altogether. So for a while, you and I will keep this secret."

Huineng agreed to do as the master instructed. He kept away from the monks' quarters and the meditation hall, and he pursued his chores in the granary.



Shortly after speaking to Huineng, Hongren called his disciples together and told them that he intended to retire. He announced

that he needed to identify a successor to follow him as Sixth Patriarch, and he challenged the monks to submit their understanding of the dharma in a short poem, or *gatha*. The one whose poem demonstrated the deepest insight, he told them, would receive the bowl and robe of Bodhidharma.

The monks consulted among themselves and decided that surely it would be the senior monk, Shenxiu, who should succeed the master and therefore there was no point in anyone else submitting a poem for consideration. Shenxiu, however, was not confident of his own understanding of the dharma, so he decided to submit his poem anonymously. If Hongren approved it, Shenxiu would acknowledge having written it, but if the patriarch did not, then Shenxiu would be able to retain face by keeping silent. "If that's the case, however," he reflected, "then I've wasted many years in this monastery and have gained the admiration of others without just cause."

There were three corridors in the meditation hall that had been whitewashed in preparation for a series of murals. An artist from the capital had been commissioned to portray significant events in the lives of the four patriarchs who had come before Hongren for the edification of the monks and visiting laypeople. That midnight, Shenxiu inscribed his poem on one of these walls. He wrote:

The body is like the Buddha-tree,
the mind a stand with a mirror bright.
Take care to wipe it clean,
and don't let dust or dirt alight!

The next morning, Hongren met with the artist who was to do the murals. When they found the *gatha* inscribed on the wall, Hongren told him, "I'm sorry to have inconvenienced you by asking you here today, but your presence is no longer necessary. These walls don't need to be painted now."

Then he called the monks together and, in their presence, he had incense lit and burnt in front of the poem to honor it. "We will leave this stanza here so that all may read and benefit from it," he

announced. "All those who practice as it describes will undoubtedly acquire great merit by doing so."

Then he signaled Shenxiu to meet with him privately. When they were alone, Hongren told Shenxiu that he suspected him to have been the author of the *gatha*, and the head monk admitted that was the case. "I'm not so vain that I expect to be declared your successor," he said. "But would you be kind enough to tell me whether I've shown any indication of wisdom."

"The enlightenment of the Buddha comes when one realizes one's true-self, the self that is neither born nor dies," Hongren told him. "You haven't achieved this yet. You've come to the gate, but you still need to pass through. Go to your quarters and reflect on this. When you come to complete realization, submit another poem, and, if it demonstrates true understanding, I'll transmit the robe and bowl to you."

Shenxiu bowed and took his leave. He meditated on the Fifth Patriarch's words for days but was unable come to any clearer understanding.

Meanwhile, the other monks had taken to reciting Shenxiu's stanza as a mantra. It so happened that, while he was hulling rice, Huineng heard one of them do so. The young man asked the monk about the *gatha*, and the monk replied disdainfully, "You Southerner, how is it that you alone of everyone in this monastery don't know of this *gatha* composed by our chief monk, who's surely to become our new master when the present patriarch retires. It's inscribed on the wall of the corridor in the meditation hall for all to read and admire."

Huineng explained that he had not yet visited the meditation hall. "But I'd be grateful if you'd show me the stanza so that I can honor it as well as everyone else."

The monk directed Huineng to the spot where Shenxiu had written his poem. When Huineng got to the corridor, he found a district official there as well. The young man asked the official to read the poem to him, explaining that he could not read himself. After hearing Shenxiu's poem once more, Huineng said: "I've also composed a poem. Could you write it on the wall for me?"

The district officer expressed surprise that someone who could not read would be able to compose a lyric, but he agreed to do so, asking only, "If you're successful in acquiring the dharma, please don't forget me."

The response that Huineng made to Shenxiu's poem went:

The body is not a tree,
nor the mind a mirror bright.
Since from the beginning not a thing exists,
where can dirt and dust alight?

There is a significant difference between Huineng's and Shenxiu's gathas. Shenxiu's remains dualistic. He compares the mind to a mirror reflecting a world external to it. For Huineng there is no separation, no mirror distinct from what it reflects and no world distinct from its reflection in mind. The reason for this difference is that Shenxiu's understanding, as Hongren pointed, was theoretical, while Huineng's was grounded in his awakened mind.

Later that day, Hongren found a group of monks gathered before the two verses, discussing who the author of the second could be. The patriarch read the new verse, then slipped off his shoe and used it to erase the new lines from the wall. The monks supposed this to mean that he disapproved of them. But when no one was observing him, Hongren went to the granary. There he told Huineng, "Those who seek the Way must be prepared to risk their lives for it." Huineng had nothing to say in reply. Then, the patriarch asked, "Is the rice ready?"

"Ready long ago," Huineng said.

Hongren told the young man to come to his quarters later that night. Huineng visited the Fifth Patriarch at midnight. When he did so, Hongren acknowledged Huineng as his successor and passed over Bodhidharma's bowl and robe to his keeping. "But you need to understand that there will be those who will object to you having these. So you must leave East Mountain and conceal yourself until the time is ready for you." The patriarch also told him that it would

no longer be necessary to continue the practice of transmitting the robe and bowl. "The real transmission," he explained, "is from mind to mind. It's because of that transmission, and not because of these relics, that you'll be known as the Sixth Patriarch of our school."

Hongren accompanied Huineng to a landing on the river where they found a boat. The Fifth Patriarch seated himself in the boat and took up the oars. When Huineng offered to take the oars himself, the older man said, "It's appropriate that I be the one to ferry you across."

"When I was in illusion, then I needed the guidance of another," Huineng replied. "But now that my mind's eye is open, it's appropriate for me to cross the waters of birth and death by my own efforts."

So Hongren turned the oars over to Huineng and got out of the boat, and the younger man set out on his own.



Three days later, a rumor went through the monastery that an illiterate layman had stolen the sacred relics of the First Patriarch and fled south with them. Outraged at this sacrilege, a group of monks went in pursuit of the thief. They were led by a monk named Ming, who, before entering the sangha, had been a general of the fourth rank. In spite of his time at the monastery, Ming still had a soldier's manner and temperament. For two months the group followed Huineng. As the chase went on, the other pursuers, one after another, gave up until Ming alone continued undaunted.

Eventually Ming caught up with Huineng at a pass in the mountains. When the new patriarch saw the former soldier approaching, he placed the robe and bowl on a rock and waited for his pursuer to come nearer.

"You've come for these," he called when Ming was within hearing distance. "These are merely symbols of our tradition. They have no other value. If you want them, take them."

But when Ming tried to pick up the items, he was unable to lift them. Shaken by this inability, Ming paused a moment, then said:

"If that's so, I have no use for them. What I've come for is the dharma. So if you are indeed the successor of Hongren, please dispel my ignorance."

"If you've come for the dharma, then please compose yourself in meditation and refrain from thinking about anything. When your mind is still and receptive, I'll teach you."

Ming did as he was told, and when Huineng saw that the monk was in a state of concentration, he commanded him: "Without thinking about good or bad, *show* me your face before your parents were born."

As soon as he heard these words, Ming also attained awakening. He bowed before the younger man, saying, "Besides this, is there anything else? Are there other secret doctrines?"

"Nothing I've said is secret. If you look within, you'll find all the secrets within your own mind."

"I spent many years on the East Mountain," Ming said, "but was unable to realize my self-nature. Now, thanks to your guidance, I realize it in the same way that one who drinks water knows whether it is hot or cold. You're now my master, and I your disciple."

"Let's, rather, say that both of us are disciples of Master Hongren," Huineng suggested.



Four years after acknowledging Huineng as his successor, Hongren died in 675. He was seventy-four years old. The Sixth Patriarch was still residing in seclusion in the mountains. He lived for a while with a group of hunters, secretly freeing the animals the hunters trapped in their nets.

When he was thirty-nine years old, he decided it was time to assume his responsibilities, and he made his way to Fat Shin Temple. As he approached it, he saw a group of monks observing and discussing a flapping pennant. The first monk said, "It's the pennant that moves." Another objected, "The pennant is an inanimate object and has no power to move; it is the wind that moves." Then a third

said, "The flapping of the pennant is due to the combination of flag and wind."

Huineng interrupted the discussion, telling the monks, "It's neither wind nor pennant that moves; rather it's your own minds that move."

When the temple master, Yin Zong, overheard this encounter, he was impressed by Huineng's authoritative manner and invited him to describe the teachings he brought from the Master of the East Mountain.

"My master had no special teaching," Huineng said. "He stressed only the need to see into one's true nature through one's own efforts."

After this, Huineng established himself at the Baolin Monastery in the mountains of the South, and here it is said thousands of people came seeking to become his disciples. His fame spread as far as the capital, where the emperor invited him to move, but Huineng declined the invitation as his master, Hongren, had done before him.

Meanwhile, in the north, Hongren's chief monk, Shenxiu was gathering his own following.