

# TRICYCLE

Copyright 2021. Tricycle. All rights reserved.

## Finding Our Essence of Mind

By Shodo Harada Roshi  
SPRING 2018

*The following teaching is a commentary by the contemporary Japanese teacher Shodo Harada on the fourth chapter of the Platform Sutra. One of the most popular and influential texts of the Chinese Chan Buddhist tradition, the sutra is attributed to Fahai, a disciple of the Sixth Patriarch of Chan, Huineng (638–713 CE). Its ten chapters relate the patriarch's talks.*

Whether it takes 20 years to be realized or one instant, the awakened essence is the same for everyone. Even though this is what the Sixth Patriarch taught his students, his school in southern China became known as the Sudden Enlightenment School, while the teachings of Jinshu Joza (Chinese, Shenxiu) in northern China were called the Gradual Enlightenment School. This dichotomy reflects the poems the two wrote at the request of the Fifth Patriarch. Jinshu Joza's poem says,

### SUSOKKAN

A breathing practice in Soto Zen meditation. One's exhalations are counted with complete concentration and followed to the last point before inhalation, as ideas and memories arise and are allowed to pass.

Our body is the bodhi tree,  
And our mind a mirror bright.  
Carefully we wipe them hour by hour,  
And let no dust alight.

In response, the Sixth Patriarch wrote:

There is no bodhi tree,

#2

Nor stand of a mirror bright.  
Since all is void,  
Where can the dust alight?

We are always thinking and confused, so Jinshu Joza said we should continually sweep our mind clean, but the Sixth Patriarch responded by saying that even thinking there is such a thing as a body and a mind is already extra—there is nothing from the origin, so why should we worry about dust alighting on it? These names *sudden* and *gradual* describe ability or perseverance, but in our *buddhanature* there are no differentiations such as earlier or later, first or last, sudden or gradual—that mind will not open completely if we hold to any such ideas!

The Sixth Patriarch's unique way of putting this is:

**BUDDHANATURE**

The potential of all beings to attain  
buddhahood.

This teaching of ours has first taken nonthought as its central doctrine, the formless as its

essence, and nonabiding as its fundamental. The formless is to transcend characteristics within the context of characteristics.

Nonthought is to be without thought in the context of thoughts.

Nonabiding is to consider in one's fundamental nature that all worldly things are empty.

No one else has expressed the deep awakening of the Buddha and all of the patriarchs as well. We may believe otherpeople are good or bad, sick or healthy, but as long as we are concerned with our form or the form of others, we will be pulled around by our beliefs. In our true nature there are no such distinctions. This is Zen's fundamental point. In our essence of mind, mountains are simply

#3  
mountains, flowers are flowers, and the sound of the wind is the sound of the wind. We hear, we see, and we leave each thing as we hear or see it, adding nothing at all to it. Everything but that is just dualistic thinking. Changing with every single moment, our mind manifests our clear nature. This is "abiding nowhere, awakened mind arises." In this way the Sixth Patriarch taught us.



Photo by Roland Schmid

We have a physical body, but our body is only a robe, and we will eventually have to take this robe off. Our body is not just moving around aimlessly, manipulating its arms and legs. Something is moving through it, something is wearing this body like a robe. Everyone takes the robe for what they are, but our true essence is not restricted by the design or form of this robe. In the words of Master Hakuin in his *Song of Zazen*: "Realizing the form of no form as form, whether going or returning we cannot be any place else. Realizing the thought of no thought as thought, whether singing or dancing we are the voice of the dharma."