Wherever You Stand 9: Who: Dajian Huineng Part 2

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Previously on “Wherever You Stand”…

We’ve begun looking into Huineng,
the Sixth and last of the founding Chan, Chinese Zen, Ancestors.

He was of the stream which came from Bodhidharma,
through
Huike,
Sengcan,
Daoxin,
Hongren.

Huineng, as you will remember, was an illiterate labourer when he came upon the Dharma. Apparently, according to some sources, he was poor, born poor. Some sources say his father was a government official, lost his job and then became poor, regardless, he seems to have remained illiterate his whole life, but yet the “Platform sutra” is attributed to him. It’s traditionally regarded as a lecture recorded by his disciple Fahai.

The earliest extant copy of the “Platform sutra” was found among papers from Dunhuang Caves, dating to about a century after Huineng lived, 783 to 813.

Now, this is an interesting point, we may hear “813” and think:
“Oh my, that’s so long ago, I think I’ll just have a snooze now…” [laughter] “…because it has nothing to do with me.”

Here’s another way of looking at it:

Picture the beginning of the universe, or even the beginning of the earth according to some sources, the globe as we know it, as having happened in a twenty-four hour clock timeframe. You with me so far?
Alright, human beings, according to some sources,
appear in the last 30 seconds
of that 24 hour clock.

So, from 713 in the case of Huineng, 713…
in the case of the papers being found that were recorded
about a hundred years after Huineng lived, in 813…
listen,
that’s only 1300 years, it is not an eye blink,
it is less than a heartbeat
on that 24 hour clock.

So these people are closer than we are accustomed to think about.
That’s reality.

These are people who sat in China in weather, in some cases, almost like this, snow flying.
Guess what?
Did they have central heating?
No.
Did they have electric lights?
No.
Did they have cars to drive themselves around if they had to go to the monastery to sit?
No.
But they went anyway and
that is the reason why
you are sitting and doing what you're doing
in front of that wall
right now.

And of course what you're doing is
recognizing that there is only this moment,
there is this bodymind wrapped around the breath
which is breathing that bodymind in and out,
there's seeing
and
hearing
and
tasting
and
touching
and
feeling
and
smelling,
there's everything that's going on
and when is it going on?

[O-sensei strikes the floor with a Teaching stick]

Right now.

You hear that and what happens?
Well if you were involved in a thought
you might have noticed that it kind of shattered.
Your job is to take that information and use it.

When you notice anything whatsoever,
notice everything else that's going on
without naming it.
No need to name it.
Learn to be really lazy

just sit there and notice
and there's noticing,
there's no "knower".

And this came from these people,
this came from Huineng.

Now, as happens everywhere, even here…
Huineng was the subject of some political struggles,
or in retrospect was seen to have been on one side with certain information and
there was another monk on another side with other information.

Shenxiu, 606 to 706, was also a student of Hongren's. The word is that factions formed.
There was the Huineng faction and there was the Shenxiu faction,
and don't think for a minute that it doesn't happen right here right now but
we don't let it get too far because we clean up misunderstandings
that different things are being taught by different people.

We're all teaching the same thing.
Some of us have different ways of expressing it,
but it's all the same thing,
it's all about practising the only thing that's going on,
this moment.

So, Huineng and the events of his life were "central to political intrigues and factional struggles that occurred between the Northern and Southern schools of Zen during the eighth century"[fn]*Zen's Chinese Heritage: The Masters and their Teachings*, by Andy Ferguson[/fn]
which was of course after
Huineng had died,
after Shenxiu had died.

So we know how people are,
they will go:
"this one was right, this is how it was, this is the 'sudden enlightenment, gradual practice school' and the other one is the study of sutras, the study of different rituals," the study of basically, probably, anything that doesn't involved sitting zazen, although I'm sure they did sit zazen.

Zazen is the central practice for practising this moment right now.

So we left Huineng, who had travelled from his home,
he had travelled and found Hongren as his Master,
after having involved himself in different situations, and
Hongren recognized him as being capable or having the capacity for great understanding and put him to work in the rice mill.

So Hongren recognized that Huineng did have a great understanding
that was not based, as Shenxiu's was,

maybe not necessarily “based”,
but was not obscured by the different studies.

Shenxiu had been educated in the Chinese classics and Daoism.
He became a Buddhist at 13 when there was a famine and
he went apparently to plead to government officials to give grain to the starving populace,
and he, in 651 began to study with Hongren,

Now there are some scholars that say there’s a possibility that
Huineng and Shenxiu were not together at the same time studying with Hongren,
so that could present some difficulty as there is a story of Transmission…

Apparently Hongren asked the monk Shenxiu to come up with a poem
that would express his understanding.
Now remember, Shenxiu,
and what became eventually the Northern School,
emphasized the reading of sutras,
the chanting of the Buddha’s name as essential to maintain “original pure mind”,
so in this sense there’s this distraction going on,
people are focussing on chanting,
focussing on reading the sutras,
focussing to maintain “original pure mind”.

The other side, the Huineng side, is
Bodhidharma’s direct pointing at mind,
that this moment and everything in it is this moment with everything in it
and there’s nothing really that needs to be done.

So Hongren asked the monks to write a verse expressing their understanding.
Shenxiu, the head monk wrote:

> *The body is the tree of wisdom*
> *The mind but a bright mirror.*
> *At all times, diligently polish it*
> *to remain untainted by the dust.*

So Abbott Hongren said:
“Oh, that’s not bad you know, but I tell you what, maybe you could try again.”

So the story is that he did try again and Hongren said:
“Not bad…”

Now again, recognize, these are different stories, nobody knows for sure.

And so Hongren said:
“Listen, tell you what, I’m going to tell this stuff to other monks, it’s so good.”

One story said that he had the other monks chanting that verse, or as it was expressed in other texts, and remember these are the words of translators, another way of translating that was:

Like the Bodhi tree is body,
Like a bright mirror on a chest, the mind,
Constantly and diligently rub it clean
So it cannot gather dust.

Now, Huineng we remember was illiterate.
As it turns out, Shenxiu wrote his verse upon the wall of a corridor in the monastery.
Huineng who according to some stories was not yet a monk but was still illiterate,
heard the monks chanting the verse and he thought:

"Hmmm. Hmmmm…."

And he got someone to write on the wall for him, and for the first translation of the verse I read from Shenxiu:

The body is the tree of wisdom
The mind but a bright mirror.
At all times, diligently polish it
to remain untainted by the dust.

Huineng wrote:

The tree of wisdom fundamentally does not exist,
Nor is there a stand for the mirror,
Originally there is not a single thing
So where would dust alight?

Hongren saw this and said:
"Well that's very good, that cuts through the material aspect, that cuts through metaphor that people might want to hang onto, that's really good."

For the other translation, the second translation I read:

Like the Bodhi tree is body,
Like a bright mirror on a chest, the mind,
Constantly and diligently rub it clean
So it cannot gather dust.

The translators wrote this, this is from "Chan and Zen Teachings" by Charles Luck.

In essence Bodhi has no tree
And the bright mirror has no chest,

In essence there is not a thing.
On what can then dust gather?

So again, with this translation, Hongren says:
“Pretty good, pretty good.”

And there’s another one, another set of translated verses, this is from the “Denkoroku”, Keizan zenji’s, as translated by Joshu Dainen roshi and Anzan Hoshin roshi.

Shenxiu, who had tried to present the verse verbally 13 times, decided to write it in a corridor:

The body is like a bodhi tree, the mind like a clear standing mirror.
Wipe it carefully again and again, never letting dust alight.

And along comes that spoiler, Huineng heard the verse when he was working in the rice mill. “Nice, but not quite right”, it kind of nagged him, so he found someone who wrote on the wall in the corridor:

Enlightenment is not a tree and the clear mirror has no stand. From the beginning there is not one thing; where can dust alight?

Hongren once again recognized Huineng’s profound understanding.
It’s very interesting,
we can never really know exactly because we have these different translations,
we weren’t there, what has changed in the language, but
it’s obvious that Huineng’s understanding cut through anything that self-image likes to hang onto: metaphors.

Self-image loves metaphors and they can be useful for pointing to, but once we hang onto them, we have a belief system.
Huineng cut through that.

So, the story is that Huineng was in the rice mill and had around his waist a stone because this would increase the weight of the person and give more heft to their milling. After the verses, and some say the day after, Hongren came to the mill where Huineng was working.

Now, this part of the story is said to be from the “Platform sutra” so we will of course at some point be exploring that.

So, Hongren came to Huineng and
seeing the stone attached around the waist (the increase in weight helped the worker put extra heft on the pedal of the rice mill),
Hongren said:
“Should a seeker of the truth risk his life for the Dharma in such a manner?”

And then Hongren said:

“Is the rice ripe?”

Huineng replied:
“Ripe long ago, but still waiting for the sieve.”

Then Hongren knocked the pestle three times with his staff and left. This is a quote from “Chan and Zen Teachings” which apparently is a quote from, as he calls it, the “Dharma Treasure of the Altar sutra”, Huineng says:

> *I immediately grasped his idea and that night in the third watch, I went to his room. He used a robe as a screen so that no one could see us from outside and expounded the “Diamond sutra” to me.*

The “Diamond sutra” was apparently the sutra that Huineng heard when he was chopping wood at the beginning of his journey. Is that true or not? We don’t know.

> *When he came to the sentence:*
> *“One should develop a mind which does not abide anywhere,”*
> *suddenly I was completely enlightened and realized that nothing existed outside the self nature.*
>
> *I then said to Hongren:*
> *“Who would have expected that the self nature is fundamentally pure and clean?*
> *Who would have expected that the self nature is fundamentally beyond birth and death?*
> *Who would have expected that the self nature is fundamentally complete in itself?*
> *Who would have expected that the self nature is fundamentally immutable?*
> *Who would have expected that the self nature can create all things?”*

So Hongren knowing now without a doubt that Huineng really understood, said:
“I’m going to transmit the robe and the bowl to you. We’re going to have to do it in secret because what are people going to think? People could get upset. Here you are, illiterate, you have Shenxiu who is not illiterate, he’s a very educated monk. Some people might get really upset.”

Now, in the Denkoroku we can read:

> *Zen Master Hongren said, “When Bodhidharma came to China a long time ago, people knew nothing about Zen and so he passed on the robe as a visible sign of attainment. Now people trust Zen, but the robe has become something to dispute over. Just let it stop with you and don’t pass it on. Now you should leave and conceal yourself far from here until the time is ripe for you to begin to teach. Your life will be in as much danger while you carry this robe as if it hung from a thread”*

So the Transmission, Hongren said, would be in dispute.

Huineng apparently did get out of town. Shenxiu we won’t pursue at this moment.
But what we have here, it seems, is Bodhidharma’s Teachings of direct pointing, which had become covered up somewhat in some areas, being uncovered again.

Is this something that we can recognize today? Indeed it is. As we say, there's the Sudden Enlightenment School. I like to think of that as being Sudden Enlightenment, Gradual Practice School. The "sudden enlightenment" is the recognizing that you want to find out what's going on, really. Once you taken that on, there comes the ups and downs, there comes the tears and the smiles, there comes the desperation, in some cases… as you have to sit there… [laughter]

until all the things that cause you problems are seen for what they are,
the rumblings of what the Roshi has called self-image:

a contraction into a sense of a self,
with a belief about how it is and how the world is,
and it is not one thing
it's many moments,

but the antidote?

As soon as you notice anything
feel the breath,
feel the whole bodymind in this whole moment
and keep on trucking.

So there we go,
sudden enlightenment,
gradual practice,
that has obviously not been forgotten.

In the "Shodoka", which was written it says, in 713 by Yoka daishi, which was just after Huineng died:

blockquote
The teachings about twenty emptinesses
are intended to disentangle you;
All are the display of this one body
of the Thus Come.

Mind arises with experiences as its objects.
Subject and object are dust on a mirror.

Free of dust, the mirror shines.
The Actual Nature is known
when mind and things do not arise.

In this Age of Ending and this sad world
suffering beings resist the truth.

We of course will, as we go through the "Shodoka", reprise sources and so forth,
but "suffering beings resist the truth"
and the suffering comes because we believe our stories.

So frak it!
Feel the breath,
sit up straight
and recognize this moment as it really is.

Do what those people did
over 1300 years,
which as I hoped to show at the beginning of this Talk,
is not even a blink in the overall scheme of things.

Another three verses from the “Shodoka: The Song of Freedom”:

> *The radical Direct Teaching is beyond sentiment;*
> *there is no room for doubt or hesitation.*
>
> *This monk doesn’t say this to create divisions;*
> *its just that you should know*
> *about the trap of permanence and its opposite.*
>
> *Right isn’t “right,” wrong isn’t “wrong;”*
> *yet an inch of deviation leads a thousand miles off.*

So we’ve all become embroiled in our stories to a greater or lesser degree.
Why?
Because essentially until we start to notice that a story is a thought…

How simple is that?

If it’s a story, it’s gotta be a thought.
Duh.

So have fun with that and we’ll get back to this,
we’ll have to come back and look at Huineng again because he was terribly influential in that many people came to be taught by him and much was written about what he said.

So, with that,

thank you for listening.

A lot of words to remind you that:

> *Its meaning is not in words*
> *But it answers sincere questioning*

So feel the breath
sit up straight…