Zheng Daoge (Shodoka): Song of Liberation

by Yongjia (Yoka daishi, d. 713)
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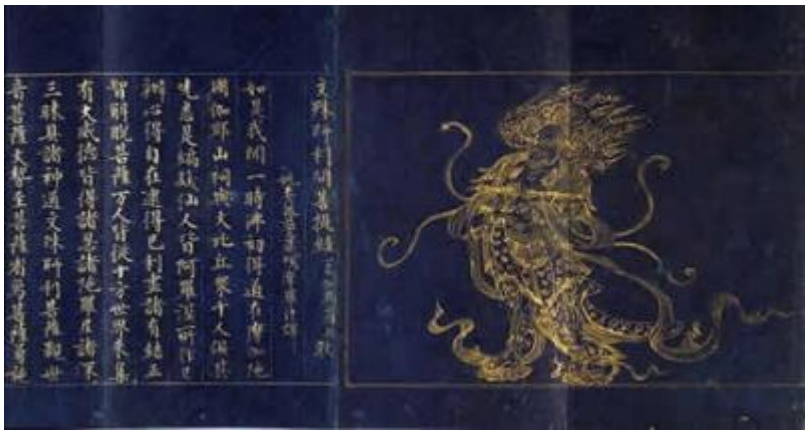

Have you ever seen one of the Way?

Beyond action and beyond learning,
one is at ease,

not struggling against delusion
or grasping after the truth.

One sees the nature of ignorance
to be itself Essential Awareness,

and the illusion of one's own body
is the Realm of Reality.

Completely realizing
the Realm of Reality to be objectless,

one finds oneself the source of all things
and one's own nature to be Awake Awareness.

The five aggregates arise and decay like
aimless clouds,
the three distorted orientations come and go
like bubbles on water.

Realizing Suchness, neither self nor things exist;
in one moment cause and effect are liberated.

If anything I say is untrue
may my tongue be pulled out for countless eons.

In a single moment of direct awakening
to the Zen of Reality as a continuous presencing,
the six perfections and countless skillful means
are complete.

The six realms of existence are a dream,
in waking they are nowhere to be found.

No error, no happiness, no loss, no gain;
you won't find these in the Actual Nature.

Having given up wiping dust from the mirror,
its brilliance is completely seen.

Who is it that thinks of
not-thinking and non-existence?
The Unborn is realized
within the born.

Can a wooden puppet attain Buddhahood
by its practice of not-thinking?

Without grasping at the four elements of this body,
drink and eat aligned with the Actual Nature.

Appearances are empty, all is impermanent;
this is the complete view of the Those Gone Into Thusness.

As a true monk I speak the truth.
If you don't agree with me, let's discuss it;

but remember that the Way of Awake Awareness
aims for the root
and is not tangled in branches and leaves.

The wish-fulfilling pearl is not recognized by beings
but here it is
within the matrix of Reality as a continual presencing.

The functioning of the six senses are neither
"is" nor "not",
and come from luminosity neither
formed nor formless.

Clarifying the five kinds of vision
brings the five powers.

When you experience the truth

you are without speculation.

You can see your reflection in a mirror;
but can you grasp the moon
reflected in the water?

We always walk alone;
yet those who have attained all tread
the same Way of liberation.

Following this ancient Way, have a light heart.
Wild looking, bones hardened,
no one will notice you.

The poverty of a child of the Buddha is obvious,
but this poverty doesn't include her Zen.

Patched robes show one's poverty
but the mind of Zen is beyond all value.

This priceless jewel can be used without hesitation
in caring for beings and ripening potentials.

The three facets of Experiencing and four wisdoms are complete
in this treasure;
the six subtle perceptions and eight liberations are marks
from this seal.

Excellent students go right to the source.
Fair and poor are hesitant to reveal
and give up their soiled veils,
and are proud of their external struggling.

If folks argue and slander you, let them:
they are playing with fire, trying to burn the sky.

When I hear them, their words are drops of nectar
and show me that this moment is free from conception.

Abusive words are disguised blessings
and my abusers good teachers.

This mind has room for slander and abuse
and is itself unborn compassion and patience.

Penetrate both the Transmission and the teachings,
practise harmonization and radical insight with brilliance,
unclouded by notions of "voidness".

I am not alone in this attainment
which Buddhas numberless as grains of sand
have displayed.

I'll freely speak the lion's Roar of Reality
which strikes fear into the hearts of beasts.

As the elephant flees, forgetting his pride
the heavenly dragon listens silent and joyful.

In the past I've crossed mountains and rivers
searching for masters and teachings in Zen.

Now I know the path of Caoxi and
my realization is beyond birth and death.

Don't lose your Zen whether walking or sitting,
be at ease in speech or silence, moving or staying,

Be calm even when facing a sword
and your clarity will never be poisoned.

Our Teacher Sakyamuni met his Teacher Dipamkara
only after practising patience through countless eons.

Birth and death follow each other ceaselessly.
Awaken directly to Unborn Reality

and be free from joy about fame
or sorrow over loss.

Stay in hermitages
in mountains and valleys amongst the pines.

Practise joyfully in vacant cabins.
Live free from complexity.

Understand Reality and your actions are without effort
unlike the actions of the usual person.

Charity given within conditions for heavenly reward
is like shooting arrows into the sky.

When its force is spent, the arrow falls
just as beings go up, then down.

The realm of conditionless action is not like that:
it is a direct leap into the realm of Those Gone Into Thusness.

Go to the root, leaving the branches.
It is like the bright moon reflected in a crystal.

Understand the jewel of liberation
and use it to benefit yourself and all others.

The moon rises over the river,
wind moves in the pines

all through the night. Purity. Calm.
What does this calm mean?

Vividly see the precepts of Essential Awareness
and the seal of the mind-ground.

Dew, fog, clouds, mists
are the true robes of our bodies.

The monk’s bowl that subdued dragons,
the staff that calmed fighting tigers
with the sound of its hanging rings

are not just relics from some old fable
but symbols of the Thus Come One’s precious Teachings.

Don’t seek truth or avoid delusion:
both are wholly empty, without form.

Neither empty nor formless,
this is the body of the Buddha.

The luminous mirror of Knowing reflects all shown it,
its vast brilliance pervades numberless worlds.

All that is, the ten thousand experiences,
arise as this luminosity beyond within or without.

Don’t grasp at “voidness” and ignore cause and effect;
such reckless confusion leads only to suffering.

Rejecting the truth and grasping at entities is
also a mistake,
it’s like jumping into a fire to avoid drowning.

To reject delusion and grasp at the truth
suits perfectly the mind of like and dislike.

Students who practise this way,
it’s like mistaking a thief as your own son.

Ignoring the treasure of Reality and losing the merit
to Awaken self and others
is due to the eighth, seventh and sixth consciousnesses.

With direct insight into these, practise Zen
and realise the Unborn with Radiant Intelligence.

Be strong and use the sword of insight.
It's blade is sharp and bright as the vajra,

it severs confusion
and the pride of shining beings and demons.

The thunder of the Reality rolls:
beat the drum of the Teachings,

spread clouds of compassion
and loose the rain of nectar.

"Dragons" and "elephants" arise to benefit countless beings
and lead the five types of students through
the Three Aspects of the Teachings.

The milk from the Himalayas is pure and rich,
it makes the ghee that I enjoy.

One nature pervades all natures.
One thing holds all things.

One moon is reflected in all waters,
all these reflections are one moon.

The Realm of Reality of all Buddhas is my own nature,
my own nature is all the Thus Come Ones.

One stage of practice contains all stages,
without form, without thought or action.

In a finger snap eighty thousand doors are open
and three great eons vanish in an instant.

Names and categories and being without them
have nothing to do with Perfect Knowing.

It is without praise or blame,
It is without boundaries, like space.

It is wherever you stand.

It is free of struggle and searching.

It cannot be held or released.

Give up the search.
It is here.

Its silence speaks, its speech is silent.
Its great giving opens the door wide.

If you ask me what doctrine I teach
I'll tell you it's Vast Awareness.

No one can agree or disagree with this
and even the shining beings can only speculate.

Having practised this for many years,
I have no choice but to tell you the truth.

"Raise the banner of the Teachings,
proclaim the Teachings of the Lineage."

Such was the Buddha's command to Caoxi.

In the Indian records, Mahakasyapa was the first
to receive and transmit the Lamp
and then down through twenty eight Ancestors.

Through the First Ancestor Bodhidharma
the Teachings of Reality came east to the Middle Kingdom,

through Six Ancestors who received the robe,
and then to countless who have realized the Way.

Truth does not stand alone, the false doesn't exist alone.
When ideas of 'being ' and 'non-being' vanish
all is empty.

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.

The time of the Buddha is long gone and confusion is deep.
Delusion is strong, practice is weak,
fear and hatred increase.

Hearing the Direct Way of the Thus Come,
some regret not being able to smash it to pieces.

Craving gives rise to suffering.
Don’t blame others for your own actions.

If you don’t want to live in suffering
do not slander the Teachings turned by the Thus Come.

Only sandalwood
grows with sandalwood.

Lions rest in dark groves, wander alone and at ease
where no other birds or animals are found.

Lion cubs follow the elders
and even a three year old can give the roar.

A fox, even if he trails after the king of the Teachings,
can still only yelp in vain.

The radical Direct Teaching is beyond sentiment;
there is no room for doubt or hesitation.

This monk doesn’t say this to create divisions;
it’s 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.

A girl of the dragon people who didn’t stray from the source,
at once realized Buddha,
while Sunaksatra was reborn in the hells.

In my youth I collected knowledge,
reading the Discourses and commentaries.

I fell into name and form, which makes as much sense
as trying to count the sands on the ocean floor.

The Buddha was speaking about me when he said,

“What gain is there in counting another’s treasure?”

I realized how for many years I had gone astray
and wandered lost.

Due to crooked inclinations and wrong views
the Thus Come’s Direct Perfection is misunderstood.

Men of the Narrow Path practise without compassion,
worldly scholars have knowledge but no wisdom.

Foolish, with wrong interpretations,
they miss the pointing finger of the empty hand.

Mistaking the finger for the moon
their practice is confused
and they fabricate complexity with senses and objects.

When not one thing is seen, this
is the Realm of Reality as a Continual Presencing
and one is truly the Sovereign Seer.

Understand the truth, and all conditional hindrances
are nowhere to be found;
not knowing true emptiness you worry
about debits and credits.

This is like a starving man turning down a
feast for a king,
or someone ill refusing the physician’s prescription.

Practise Zen in this world of desires
like a lotus blossoming in the midst of flames.

Even Pradhanasura, although he broke the grave precepts
woke up to the Unborn and achieved his realization of the Buddha.

Having heard the Lion’s Roar, the fearless teaching,
what will become of those who obstinately waver?

Breaking their precepts, losing their wisdom,
they ignore the open door to the Thus Come.

Once two monks, one who had committed sexual misconduct,
the other had taken life,
were condemned by Upali’s flickering wisdom.

The great being Vimalakirti erased their doubts
like the sun melting frost and snow.

The inconceivable power to liberate beings
has activities numberless as the sands of the Ganges.

Making the four kinds of offerings,
even a thousand gold pieces would not be enough;

reducing bones and body to dust could not repay
words ensuring a leap over numberless eons.

This is the supreme Sovereign Reality,
the experience of countless Thus Come Ones.

Understanding what this precious jewel of mind is
I now transmit it to any who will receive it.

Seeing clearly, there is not one thing,
not man, not Buddha.

The worlds of the universe are like froth on the sea,
sages and wise men appear like lightening.

Even with a hot iron wheel burning on one’s head,
great realized-practice will not be stirred.

Even if demons can cool the sun and heat the moon,
they cannot obstruct the truth of these words.

When an elephant-drawn carriage moves
can a praying mantis block its passing?

Elephants cannot fit into a rabbit’s tracks,
enlightenment cannot be circumscribed.

Don’t abuse the ultimate with narrow views.

If you are not yet clear, this Song gives the key.