

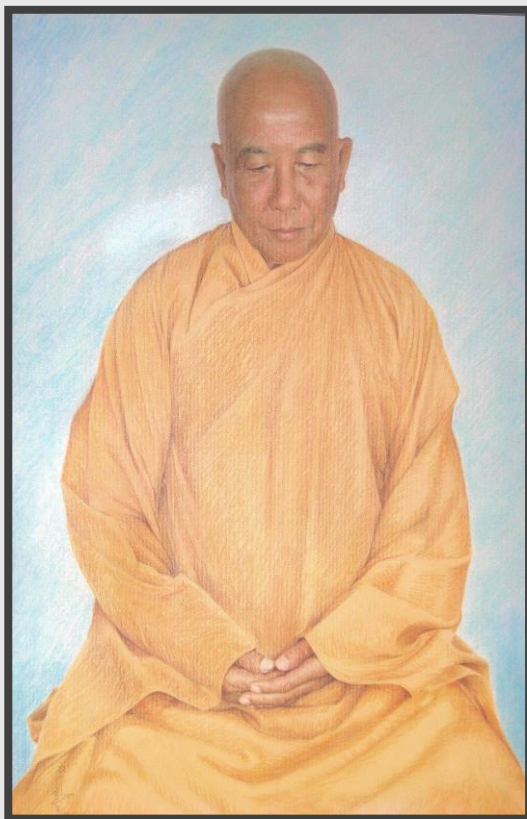
Zen Master

# Thich Thanh Tu

## Vietnamese Zen at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century

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## **1.THE ZEN GATE**

1.1 Do we know who we are? Every day we say “I”, how do we define the “I” or “Self”? (Are we referring to our physical being or to our mind or thoughts. Is our True Self our physical body or our mind, or neither?).

### **1.2 Our Physical Body**

1.2.1 If our physical body is our “self”, then it should be permanent. For example our arms are part of our body. If for some reason one of our arms were badly injured, and were amputated and replaced by an artificial arm, would we consider the “borrowed” arm (artificial limb) as truly our self?

1.2.2 We all believe that our physical being is real, but the Buddha said otherwise. A real thing must have a fixed form that is unchanging, and not dependent on anything outside of itself. If this physical being were real, it would not need to borrow sustenance from its surroundings. Right now, we are breathing; that is, we are inhaling the air around us, then exhaling it. We do not create or own the air; we borrow it, so it is not ours. Similarly, when we drink water, it is not ours, either. With respect to all food and nutrients on which our body depends, we must consume and then discard them. Even the four basic elements of life (earth-water-air-heat) are borrowed to keep us alive, but we believe that they belong to us, they become our body.

1.2.3 Let's examine this state of being alive. It is simply a long process of borrowing and giving back<sup>1</sup>. For example, we have just built a house. We temporarily borrow the furniture from our neighbor; then we claim it as our own<sup>2</sup>. This signifies a lack of wisdom on our part. Are we aware of what we are doing? If we cannot comprehend this concept, we will not be able to understand the truth of our life.

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<sup>1</sup> Everything we “borrow” and discard is not lost, but is returned to the cycle of life and eventually is borrowed by us once again.

<sup>2</sup> If we do so, we are living in a dream and are unaware that the furniture is only borrowed and is not ours. We want it to be ours and therefore insist that it is.

For this reason the Buddha determined to find the enlightenment that is within all human beings, and which is the basis of all life. Enlightenment in a human being means the ability to distinguish the real from the unreal. Once we are aware of the truth about ourselves, we will be aware of all phenomena.

1.2.4 Our ignorance leads us to believe our body is real; as a result, we exaggerate our body's importance, and give great value to its needs. We become greedy to fulfill our body's demands and we indulge and embellish it endlessly. The desire to have abundant material gain causes us to crave and to accumulate wealth. Our ignorant greed causes conflicting emotions in us, such as anger, love, hate, etc. Our craving also causes conflict with others who are also ignorant and believe their bodies are real. Ignorance, Greed and Anger are the three poisons that create the countless sufferings for all sentient beings.

### **1.3 Our Mind**

1.3.1 In the previous section A, we explained the truth about our body. Now we describe the realities of our mind.

1.3.1.1 According to the Surangama Sutra, the Buddha wanted to help his disciple Ananda become liberated. So he asked him, "What made you decide to leave the secular world?" Ananda replied, "I saw the Tathagata's thirty-two characteristics which were supremely beautiful, wondrous, and incomparable. His entire body had a shimmering transparency, just like crystal.

Upon seeing this, I felt a powerful longing to leave home, follow this superb being, and become a monk.”

1.3.1.2 Buddha then asked Ananda: "What did you use to see the Buddha and what did you use to feel what you felt toward him?" Ananda replied, "I used my eyes to see and my mind to feel."

1.3.1.3 The Buddha then asked Ananda the same question seven times: "How do you define your mind?" Ananda replied seven times, "My thinking is my mind; my mind is inside of me; my mind is outside of me; my mind is in my eye, etc." Most of us would give the same answer that Ananda gave, but Buddha rejected all of Ananda's answers.

### **1.3.2 What Is Our Mind?**

What is our mind and where does it come from? We cannot know the true nature of mind until we understand our false assumptions or beliefs about self and mind.

We often make the mistake of believing that our ability to think, to feel, and to distinguish is a function of our mind. This is incorrect. The technical term for this incorrect idea is "Nang Suy Vi Tam" (from the Surangama Sutra) which means "the ability to think is our mind." If our ability to think and our thinking are our mind, then are this ability and our thoughts ourselves?

### **1.3.3 Our Knowledge Is Also Borrowed**

The knowledge that we acquire during our lifetime is also borrowed - from the people with whom we associate, from books, etc. We believe that we own our borrowed knowledge. We acquire or borrow many concepts, opinions, and views from others. We believe that these concepts and views are our self, our mind. This causes suffering for ourselves and others because we become attached to our borrowed ideas and concepts. If others don't agree with our ideas, we feel the need to prove that we are correct, and to defend our views. This causes conflict between us, between individuals, and between communities.

In order to realize our true self, our true mind, it is necessary for us to understand and practice the Buddha's teachings. If we can do this, we will end our own suffering, and we will stop causing suffering to others.

### **1.3.4 Belief and Wisdom**

Some people contend that the Avatamsaka Sutra says, “Belief is the source of the Way, the mother of all merits and virtues”. Why should we enter the Way by means of wisdom, not mere belief? It is because in Buddhism belief must be based on wisdom. For example, when I stated that this body and our thoughts are borrowed. You should analyze for yourself whether what I have said is true or false. Only after careful consideration should we believe what we hear. This kind of belief comes from wisdom.



Hence, after hearing anything, we should think carefully about what we have heard, and then put it into practice.

In Buddhism, this process is called Learning, Thinking, and Practicing. If belief is arrived at by this process, it can be said that “Belief is the mother of all virtues, the root of the Way”. On the contrary, if we blindly trust and believe whatever we hear, without thinking about it or checking it out, we are simply being superstitious.

## **1.4 Zen Practice**

1.4.1 Zen is a method of practice that makes it possible for us to realize the truth within us. Through the practice of Zen, we can learn to differentiate truth from falsehood. The goal of Zen is to realize our True Nature, our Buddha Nature - the Dharmakaya, the priceless gem. After understanding clearly what is false, we can realize what is true and right. Once we have realized the truth, we will no longer be attracted to the false, and no longer will we drift on the ocean of birth and death. After realizing the true self, we will be liberated, live in peace, and abide in the unborn and undying.

1.4.2 We would like to offer you some gathas to illustrate these truths. The first one is by Zen Master Van Hanh who lived in the early Ly Dynasty:

*This body, like lightning, appears, then disappears.*

*Plants and trees are fresh in the Spring, wither in the Fall.*

*Accept growth and decay without fear.*

*All things are like dewdrops on a blade of grass.*

1.4.3 Consider the body. It is only a shadow, an image, an illusion. It's here one moment and gone the next, like the foliage of trees whose life cycle follows the four seasons. Let your body, your surroundings, and your life flow like driftwood. The ups and downs, the good and the bad that we encounter throughout our life are as impermanent as the morning dew. If we live thus, we shall feel no fear. That is the spirit of Zen.

1.4.4 Zen Master Viên Chiếu in the Ly Dynasty left the following gatha:

*This body is like a shaking, old wall.  
Worldly people are all worried about it.  
If they could attain the empty and no-form mind,  
When form and emptiness appear or disappear,  
People would let them take their turn, without fear.*

1.4.5 The content of the poem reflects the philosophy of Zen in that it compares the human body to the wall of a structure. When the wall collapses, the whole structure crumbles; that is the reason why people are sad and worried. If we could maintain a calm mind, we would no longer worry about form and shape. Then we would not care whether things come or go, appear or disappear.

1.4.6 Zen masters focus their teachings on emptiness. They see clearly that this body is impermanent and not self. With such wisdom, they simply live in peace and contentment. When this body is in good condition, they don't become attached to it; when it deteriorates, they smile at it without tears. Why do we cry when we're about to die? Because we fear the loss of our body. If the body is not our true self, why should we mourn its loss? If our physical body is only an image, a bubble, why do we give it such importance? If we do not give it such importance, while we are living we will not suffer. And when we are dying, we also will not suffer. This is liberation.

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## **2. ENTERING THE GATE OF EMPTINESS**

### **2.1 Zen Mind.**

The Zen gate is the Gate of Emptiness. When we enter the Gate of Emptiness, we enter the Zen house. Yet, what is Emptiness and how do we realize Emptiness?

2.1.1 We are well aware that the cause of Samsara (the cycle of birth and death) is Karma. Depending on the type of Karma accumulated during our lifetime, we will be reborn in one of the six realms of existence. Where does karmic consequence come from? There is no doubt that it derives from the three actions: speech, deeds, and thoughts. What causes us to be reborn into Samsara, the cycle of birth and death? We are responsible for our own Karma. Our speech, our deeds, and our thoughts are the causes of our rebirth. Which one of these three actions plays the leading role? We all know it is our thoughts. If we think good thoughts, we will say good things and do good deeds, and good karma will prevail. Our negative deeds and thoughts will produce negative Karma.

When reciting the sutras, if we want to earn good merits, we must focus on the sutras, our mind unperturbed and calm. Zen is a method of pacifying one's mind. When the mind is pacified, it is unperturbed, and we attain one-pointedness of mind. How do we focus our mind in order to enter the gate of emptiness?

2.1.2 While Zen master Huai-jang of Mount Nan-yueh made his daily stroll, he came across a monk, Mat-su Tao-I, who had been sitting still in the same place everyday and all day long.

One day, Master Huai-jang cleared his throat to make a sound. Mat-su opened his eyes and saw the Master. The Master Huai-jang asked, "Why are you sitting in meditation?"

Mat-su replied, "I am meditating to become enlightened like the Buddha."

The Master walked back into his quarters without saying anything. The next day, he brought a piece of brick and settled by a big rock near the monk and started to polish the brick.

Mat-su asked, "Why are you polishing the brick?"

The Zen master responded, “I want to make a mirror out of it.”

Mat-su said, “That makes no sense. How can you make a mirror out of a piece of brick?”

The Zen Master Huai-jang replied, “Well, if the brick can not be polished into a mirror, how can you just sit there and become a Buddha? If you think that sitting in meditation is the true Zen, you really destroy the meaning of Zen; and if you think sitting will make you become a Buddha, you have ‘killed the Buddha!’”<sup>3</sup>

2.1.3 We often hear the terms Precepts, Concentration, and Wisdom. Zen is simply a method of maintaining both wisdom and concentration at the same time. (Sitting in meditation is not the only way to attain wisdom and concentration). We can also attain concentration and wisdom through any action at any time. While we are cutting logs, gathering vegetables, cooking or carrying water we can practice Zen. If we wait until we sit down and compose ourselves to practice meditation for a couple of hours, then what happens to the remaining hours of our day? We should practice Zen all day and every day.

2.1.4 Let’s return to the story of the sitting monk, Mat-su Tao-I. After hearing the comments of the Zen Master Huai-jang, he asked, “Master, then what is the right way to practice?” The Zen Master replied, “Well, for instance, an ox pulls a cart.

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<sup>3</sup> The posture of the body cannot be Buddha, it is an allusion of Buddha.

If the cart does not move, should the farmer beat the cart or the ox.

## **2.2 Pacifying the Mind**

How can we eliminate the principal cause of karmic consequence (our “thoughts” or mind)? To explain how, I will recount the story of Bodhidharma and Shen-kuang.

2.2.1 After the Zen Master Bodhidharma came to China, he lived for nine years in a cave on Shao Lin Mountain, and all during that time he sat in meditation<sup>4</sup> facing a wall of the cave. One day, Shen-kuang come to the cave to ask Bodhidharma's instructions. He was given the name Hui-k'o when he became Bodhidharma's disciple (and later became the second Zen Patriarch in China).

Shen-Kuang had spent many years in meditation, depriving himself of food and sleep, but he still had not pacified his mind. Therefore, when he first met Bodhidharma, he asked, "Venerable, my mind is not at peace. Would you please teach me how to calm my mind, to liberate it from all defilements?" Bodhidharma replied, "Bring your mind to me, and I shall pacify it for you." Shen-kuang exclaimed, "I cannot find my mind." Bodhidharma simply said, "I have just pacified your mind for you." At that moment, Shen-kuang was enlightened. He learned how to pacify his own mind.

2.2.2 Hui-k'o himself believed that his thoughts were his mind. If we understand that our thoughts are not our true mind, but simply the images of the six sense objects, we will no longer be disturbed by our thoughts.

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<sup>4</sup> Sitting is only the most effective posture for meditation practice in order to harmonize our body. The factor which decides the result of the meditation, that is the awareness or the wisdom, is the mind. Bodhidharma is enlightened, his sitting meditation is to make his enlightenment deeper. The sitting meditation in the case of Mat-su and Hui-k'o who were not enlightened, is not the same as Bodhidharma.



In the Only Consciousness School, our thoughts are called “memory images of the sense objects”, these images are retained in our store consciousness. If we recognize that our ordinary mind has only these false thoughts and emotions, and that they are our “enemies”, then we can let them go as soon as they appear. The simplest way of practicing meditation is to keep your mind clear of all thoughts.

2.2.3 In order to enter the Zen gate, we must be aware that our thoughts and emotions are not real. As they arise, we should release them. We must acknowledge the fact that the past, the present, and the future are nothing but illusions. Let's look at our environment and things around us. Are they real? Is this table real? To our eyes it seems real. However, when perceived by the Prajna eyes (the eyes of wisdom), it becomes evident that the table is formed by conditioned causes. Its nature is therefore empty.

### **2.3 Three Sutras on Emptiness**

2.3.1 In the Heart Sutra, the first sentence states, "Avalokitesvara Bodhisattva, when practicing deeply the Prajna Paramita, realized that all five skandhas are empty; thus he overcame all suffering." If we assume that the five skandhas (or the five aggregates - form, feeling, perception, mental formation (volition), and consciousness) are real, we will suffer when we are criticized. But if we recognize that the five skandhas are empty, there is no suffering at all. Thus, when applying the Heart Sutra to our daily life, we will be able to save ourselves, other people, and all sentient beings. The Heart Sutra states that "Form is Emptiness." Although phenomena are empty, they are temporarily formed by conditioned causes. This is the real meaning of "Emptiness", as stated in the Heart Sutra. It does not mean voidness or nothingness. Thus realizing the meaning of the Heart Sutra is necessary if we are to enter the Way or the Zen Gate.

2.3.2 In the Lotus Sutra, the Buddha preached, “Enter the house of compassion, put on the robe of patience, and sit on the seat of Emptiness.” This seat of Emptiness is the throne of Buddha, which is permanently indestructible.

2.3.3 In the Diamond Sutra, the Bodhisattva practices “dana paramita,” the ultimate practice of giving, in which the giver, the receiver and the gift are all empty by nature. The giver and the receiver are composed of five aggregates which are empty. The gift, which is composed of four elements, is also empty. Therefore, when cultivating the Six Paramitas (generosity, discipline, patience, diligence, meditation, and wisdom), we must always base our practice on Prajna Wisdom in order to attain the final goal of enlightenment.

## 2.4 Zen Teaching on Emptiness

The Zen Master Wei-hsin in the T'ang dynasty explained his awakening as follows: “Thirty years ago, I perceived that rivers are rivers, and mountains are mountains<sup>5</sup>. Then I met great teachers and realized that rivers and mountains were not rivers and mountains<sup>6</sup>. Thirty years later, again I perceived that rivers are rivers, and mountains are mountains<sup>7</sup>.” By the same token, before coming to this lecture, you perceived houses as houses, roads as roads, and people as people. Everything seemed real to you. Now you are able to realize that the five aggregates are empty, you will be able to realize that all phenomena are empty, and you realize that mountains are not mountains, and rivers are not rivers. It can take thirty years to fully attain the realization of the suchness of the mind and all phenomena. Only then can we perceive the mountains and rivers, as they are.

To conclude today's lecture, I would like to quote the following poem by layman P'ang-yun:

*From the ten directions, we have gathered here  
To learn non-doing<sup>8</sup>.*

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<sup>5</sup> Before studying the Prajna Paramita Sutra we perceive that rivers and mountains are real and permanent.

After attaining the emptiness-nature of all phenomena we continue to practice and we will next realize the suchness of all phenomena.

<sup>6</sup> After learning and practicing Prajna Paramita we realize that the true-nature of rivers and mountains is emptiness.

<sup>7</sup> After attaining the emptiness-nature of all phenomena we continue to practice and we will next realize the suchness of all phenomena.

<sup>8</sup> Non-doing is doing everything without attachment.

*This place is a school to attain Buddhahood,  
Those who have realized the empty mind will graduate.*



### **3. RECOGNIZING THE TRUE NATURE**

#### **3.1 Definition of the True Nature**

In the Surangama Sutra, the Buddha defined the terms “Guest” and “Dust” as follows, “In the space around us, every morning at sunrise, we can see many tiny grains of dust floating and dancing in the sunlight. Space is motionless while dust is always moving. Space has no birth or death; while dust has birth and death. Therefore, dust is an object in space. So is the word “Guest”. According to the Buddha, for instance, a traveler rents a hotel room for the night and will leave there the next morning. Just like dust, the “Guest” comes and goes, while the Owner of the hotel remains there. Therefore, a “Guest” is impermanent, and an “Owner” is permanent.

According to the Buddha, the word “Owner” can mean many different things, such as Buddha Nature, Buddha- Knowledge, Original Face, etc. This Owner is the ever-awaken, who is never born and never dies. Therefore, it is called Buddha Wisdom. This Owner has complete knowledge of all sentient beings which is called Buddha-Knowledge. This Owner can store a supreme knowledge, so it is called the Tathagata Store. This Owner is the Mind that has neither births nor deaths, thus it is called the True Mind. This Owner is immutable, so is called the Dharmakaya. This Owner is the inherent nature (True Nature) of everyone, so it is called the Original Face. It has many names because the Buddha and Patriarchs named it depending upon the demands of different situations.

## **3.2 How to recognize the True Nature**

### **3.2.1 Realizing the True Nature through our six sense organs**

In order to point out the True Nature, I am going to use a gatha from the Surangama Sutra to illustrate. It says that, “a wonderful bright light (wonderful wisdom) can produce six functioning units.” Imagine that a little house has six wide open doors.

At night, when we stand outdoors (far away from the house) and wonder if this house has a light, we must look at the house's doors. If there are bright lights radiating out through those doors, we can tell that the house has a light. We have not actually seen the lightbulbs inside the house, but we have seen the radiance that beams through six doors.

In the Surangama Sutra, the essential truth that the Buddha would like to demonstrate is the True Mind or the Tathagata Store, which is inherent in each of us. This True Mind or the Tathagata Store is the bulb of light in us, a wonderful wisdom. The six functioning units are our six sense organs: eye, ear, nose, tongue, body, and mind. In these sense organs, there are always beams of light, but we do not realize or see them in the right way.

### **3.2.2 The True Nature is immovable**

To demonstrate the True Nature to Ananda and the holy Sangha Assembly, the Buddha raised his hand with his fingers spreading out, then slowly folded them to form a fist, and repeated the action.

He then asked Ananda, "Did you see it?"

"Yes, Master." Ananda replied.

"What did you see?" The Buddha asked.

Ananda answered, "I saw that you raised up your hand with your fingers spreading out then folded those fingers into a fist."



The Buddha asked, “Then, did my hand move or your seeing move?”

Ananda answered, “Your hand moved. My seeing was not calm much less active.”

After testing Ananda with a hand, the Buddha used his halo to radiate to the left side of Ananda. Ananda turned his head to the left. Then in the same motion, the Buddha’s halo radiated to the right side of Ananda. This time, Ananda turned his head to the right.

The Buddha then asked, “Why was your head moving?”

Ananda responded, “I was following the halo rays.”

“Then, was your head or your seeing moving?” The Buddha asked.

Ananda replied, “My head was moving. My seeing remained still.”

Again, a head represents our physical body, and it can be active. However, our Seeing is tranquil and immovable.

### **3.3 Realizing the True Nature through the Seeing**

After hearing the Buddha’s comment that we all possess the no-birth and imperishable one, the King Pasenadi asked, “The heretics said that our life ends after we die. Now why do you state that this body possesses the no-birth and imperishable one?”

The Buddha then asked, “Is your body perishable or not?”

The King responded, “It is perishable.”

The Buddha said, “You are still here, why do you say your body is perish?”

The King replied, “Eventhough my body has not yet perished, I know that it is gradually dying. It is deteriorating over the years. My body at sixty is totally different with my body when I was ten years old.”

The Buddha asked, “Then, right in this perishable body, have you ever recognized the one that is never destroyed?”

The King answered, “No, I have not.” The Buddha then asked, “How old were you when you first saw the Ganges river?”

The King said, “I first saw it when I was three years old. On my visit to Ky Ba Thien Temple with my Mother, we rode across the Ganges river.”

The Buddha said, “Did your Seeing of the Ganges river at the age of three differ with the Seeing of the Ganges river at the age of ten, twenty?”

The King responded, “The Seeing did not change.”

The Buddha asked, “What about when you were at the age of twenty, thirty, and forty?”

The King replied, “The Seeing has never change, even now that I am sixty years old.”

The Buddha concluded that “You are concerned about this deteriorating body, but within your physical body, there is an existence that has never changed and aged. That which changes will obviously perish. Why are you worried that one that never changes will perish? You also believe that our life will end after we die.”

Now, do you understand clearly the Seeing nature inherent in each of us? It never ages.

### **3.4 Realizing the True Nature through the permanent Hearing**

The Buddha demonstrated the True Nature through the permanent Hearing. He instructed Rahula to strike a bell once, then he asked Ananda and the Sangha Assembly, “Did all of you hear that?”

Everyone replied, “Yes.”

When the sound ended, the Buddha asked, “What about now? Are you still hearing?”

Everyone answered, “No. We did not hear.”

The Buddha asked again, “How could you hear it and now not hear it?”

Ananda explained, “When a bell was struck, its sound vibrated causing us to hear the sound. When the sound stopped, we could not hear it.”

The Buddha asked Rahula to strike a bell again and asked, “Is there a sound?”

Everyone responded, “Yes.”

When the sound ceased, the Buddha asked, “Is there a sound now?”

Everyone replied, “No, there is no sound.”

The Buddha asked again, “How do we recognize sound and no sound?”

The assembly replied, “The sound presented when we struck a bell, and when we did not strike it, a sound ceased.”

The Buddha scolded, “Why are all of you foolish today?”

If we gave the same answers to the Buddha’s questions, we would also be reprimanded. Why? Again, a bell’s sound is an outer existence, which is the object of hearing. However, Hearing is our own possession. It is permanent. Here, we incorporated a sound and a hearing into one function. Is that crazy? Everyday, we live with an up-side-down mind. A sound comes and goes, while a hearing is permanent. When there is a sound or not, our hearing capacity remains the same.

### **3.5 Reversing our gaze away from externals and looking inside ourself is our principal duty<sup>9</sup>**

Let’s return to the example of the light and the six doors of the little house. The shadows cast by the light beams shining through the doors will vary in size and shape depending upon the size and shape of each door. Do the shadows change shape because of the light or the doors? We recognize that the light is unchanged and that the doors create the different shapes of the shadows. If we stand inside the house looking outward through the doors, we can see the outdoor areas, but

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<sup>9</sup> Instead of being focused on externals, and being attached to the six sens objects, we turn our observation inward to become aware of the activities of our mind. This is our principal duty in order to become Buddha.

we cannot see the light behind us. Now, if we turn around and look into the house, we will no longer see the outdoor areas and we will be able to see the light within the house.

Therefore, when asked by his disciple Phap Loa (Dharma Drum) about the most essential element of self-cultivation, the king Tran Nhan Tong, the first patriarch of the Vietnamese Bamboo Forest Zen School, replied, “Reversing your gaze away from externals and looking inside yourself is your principal duty.”

### 3.6 The Sutras pointing to the True Nature

In the Surangama Sutra, the Buddha Sakya Muni and all other Buddhas of the ten directions advised Ananda and the disciples that, “Your six sense organs are the roots of Samsara. They are also the roots of Nirvana.” The sutra further states “We first acquire primary knowledge and on this basis acquire more and more knowledge. This is the root of ignorance. If in the other hand we first acquire primary knowledge and on this basis do not acquire more and more knowledge, this is Nirvana.”<sup>10</sup>.

Thus, discriminating<sup>11</sup>, and chasing after sense objects is the root of the deluded mind. Yet, if we are aware of all things outside of ourselves without discrimination, evaluation, deluded thinking or thoughts and after acquiring primary knowledge we don't acquire more and more knowledge we will attain the Bodhi mind or Nirvana<sup>12</sup>.

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<sup>10</sup> If we have knowledge without practice, we cannot attain wisdom or Nirvana. Knowledge is gained first through hearing or reading, and secondally by thinking. People often mistake “thinking” for realization. Only through Practice can we attain realization of wisdom or Nirvana.

<sup>11</sup> Discrimination means not only to perceive the difference between various phenomena but to react subjectively to these differences with emotions, judgments and preferences. Our discriminations arise from our attachments and our illusion of a personal self.

<sup>12</sup> Primary knowledge involves differentiation without discrimination. Differentiation means to perceive the objective differences between various phenomena, such as the difference between red and yellow or tree and house, for example. There is no attachment and no-self involved when we differentiate, and we are aware of phenomena as they are.



The Wonderful Dharma Lotus sutra<sup>13</sup> states: “All Buddhas appeared in the world with only one great purpose: To reveal the Buddha-knowledge (Buddha-nature); to explain its meaning; to cause all sentient beings to understand and realize it.”

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<sup>13</sup> There are two kinds of Dharma:

- “dharma” as phenomena (everything).
- “Dharma” as Buddhadharmā, the Dharma taught by Buddha, which is also called the Second Jewel, Wonderful Dharma, Reality or Ultimate Truth.

In this sutra the most important chapter that focuses on the True Nature is Beholding the Precious Stupa. While Buddha was teaching the Lotus Sutra to the assembly of the Bodhisattvas, suddenly a stupa of seven precious jewels sprung up from earth and hung in the air. From the stupa, the Buddha of Abundant Treasures spoke words of praise for Sakya Muni.

Do you remember the paragraph from the Lotus Sutra that highlighted the saying “Entering the Buddha’s home, clad in Buddha’s robe, and sitting on Buddha’s throne”? Buddha’s home symbolizes ultimate compassion; Buddha’s robe symbolizes humility and patience; and Buddha’s throne symbolizes the empty nature of all phenomena. The stupa that rose from earth and floated in the sky symbolizes the Empty Nature of all phenomena<sup>14</sup>.

When we are no longer attached to the six sense objects, we can realize our own root which is our own Buddha-knowledge or our own Buddha-Abundant-Treasures. The Buddha-Abundant-Treasures is our Dharma Body, and our Buddha-knowledge. The stupa built of Seven Jewels (gold, silver, lapis lazuli, crystal, agate, red pearl and carnelian) stands for the Seven Elements - earth, water, air, fire, space, sight and perception. As long as we live in delusion there are Seven Elements. When we become enlightened, the Seven

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<sup>14</sup> The “stupa” symbolizes all phenomena; “earth” symbolizes our mind from which all phenomena arise; the “sky” symbolizes the empty nature of all phenomena.

Elements become the Seven Jewels<sup>15</sup>. (In the sutras, the ultimate truth is often symbolized by jewels).

### **3.7 Zen Masters reveal the True Nature**

Zen masters often refer to the True Nature as a jewel, as illustrated by the following story:

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<sup>15</sup> This is a metaphor for the transformation of an ordinary human being into a Buddha.

A Zen master said to Venerable Shih-chiu, a Mat-su disciple, "There is a jewel in the palm of Bodhisatva Ksitigarba. What does it signify?" Shih-chiu replied, "Do you have a jewel in your hand?" The Zen master replied, "I don't know". Immediately the Venerable composed the following poem:

*(Because) You don't know you have the treasure at home,  
You waste your time running after externals.  
It is like trying to run away from your own shadow,  
Or like the man who is frightened when not seeing his  
head's reflection in the mirror,  
after putting the mirror face down.*

The Zen master Hsua-chueh from Yung-chia states :

*The Mani pear<sup>16</sup> is unknown to people  
You can find it in the Tathagata Store<sup>17</sup>  
The wonderful functions of six senses are both empty and  
not empty,  
(And arise from) One perfect light<sup>18</sup> with form yet formless.*

The Zen monk Phap Dang asked a Zen guest, "How can you reach the top of a hundred yard pole?" The Zen monk replied: "By just keeping silent". Phap Dang meditated on that statement for over three years. One day, he rode a horse across a wooden bridge. Part of the bridge gave away and

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<sup>16</sup> The Mani Pearl is the True Nature. "Mani" means the magic which grants wishes. In Buddhism, the magic pearl grants true happiness at all times.

<sup>17</sup> The Eighth consciousness transformed by enlightenment. It has neither bad nor good Karmic seeds. It is empty.

<sup>18</sup> True Nature.

Phap Dang and the horse were thrown off the bridge. At that moment Phap Dang became enlightened and composed the following poem:

*I have a precious gem)*

*It was deeply buried within me for a long time*

*Today I am completely cleansed,*

*And I can now see the luster (of the jewel).*

*It illuminates rivers and mountains all over the world.*

### **3.8 Recognizing the True Nature through Zen anecdotes.**

On the Ling-shan mountain (Vulture Peak), the Buddha ascended his Dharma throne and held up a single lotus flower before all his disciples. No one understood his gesture except Maha Kassapya who smiled serenely. Immediately the Buddha said: "I have the True Dharma Eyes Store, Nirvana True Mind, and True Form without Form. I now transmit them to Maha Kassapya." This was heart-to-heart transmission<sup>19</sup>. In the Zen tradition we say, "Seeing the form, the True Mind is revealed". The Buddha had no intention of talking about the flower when he showed it to everyone. As he observed the flower, Maha Kassapya realized that he had within himself something unborn and imperishable, and he smiled. He communicated with the Buddha's mind, and received the mind-seal from the Buddha.

Ma-tsu Tao-i while strolling one day in the garden with his disciple Pai-chang Hui-hai, saw a flock of wild geese in flight. Ma-tsu asked Pai-chang, "What was that?" Pai-chang replied, "That was a flock of geese." "Where are they now", asked Ma-tsu. "They just flew away", replied Pai-chang. Upon hearing this response, Ma-tsu grabbed Pai-chang's nose and twisted it so painfully that the latter screamed. Ma-tsu then said, "Why don't

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<sup>19</sup> When a student becomes enlightened, he receives the "mind-seal" from his master. This means that his mind is now identical to his master's mind. The image produced by the stamping of a seal is always the same as the image engraved on the seal. Although the student's mind is now identical to his master's mind, the student's "virtue" is less than that of his master.

you say, ‘ This too has just flown away?’ ” Immediately, Paichang became enlightened.

The geese flew by and were gone but the Seeing was not gone.

Seeing is knowing; hearing is knowing. They come from the True Mind which is unchanging, unborn, undying and ever-existing. When we realize this Knowing, we will be able to travel on the same path the Zen Patriarchs have followed.

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