

## CHAO-CHOU TSUNG-SHEN

( 778 - 897 )

Chao-chou's longevity makes him a contemporary of his nephews in the Way. Still a novice, Chao-chou arrives at Nan-chuan's house. Nan-chuan rests, he remains lying down but still asks the visitor the classic question:

"Where do you come from?"

Chao-chou replies simply:

"I come from Tuan-siang."

Nan-chuan asks almost mechanically:

"Have you seen Tuan-siang?"

Chao-chou replies strangely this time:

"I have not seen Tuan-siang, I see only the tathagata lying down."

Nan-chuan is surprised but he is not caught off guard:

"Are you a novice with a master or a novice without a master?"

Chao-chou replies with a smile:

"I have a master."

Nan-chuan immediately asked:

"Where does your master live?"

Chao-chou reveals the identity of his master without ceremony:

"In the middle of winter it is very cold, I very much hope that you will receive ten thousand happiness."

Nan-chuan does not protest, Chao-chou is indeed his disciple.

After having achieved the great awakening, Chao-chou went to Sung-yueh to receive the ordination of a monk, and then he returned without delay to Nan-chuan.

Chao-chou has always been a much loved and venerated master in the Tchan, his gentleness and finesse have in no way been synonymous with softness or weakness.

One day he visits Huang-po. Seeing him arrive, Huang-po slammed the door of his room.

Chao-chou rushes to the Dharma Hall, lights a small fire and shouts at the top of his voice:

"Fire!" Fire!

Huang-po ran up, grabbed Chao-chou and shouted to him:

"Speak! Talks!"

Chao-chou said coldly:

"The bandits are already gone, only now are you drawing the bow."

Two first cousins in the Way having fun, and the great giant Huang-po is being fooled by Chao-chou!

## LIN-TSI I-HSUAN

( ? - 866 )

The life of Lin-tsi is well known, and I will recall only a few edifying episodes.

At the beginning of his peregrinations, Lin-tsi finds himself at Huang-po's house. Mu-chou, the chief monk of the time, asked him one day:

"How long have you lived here?"

Lin-tsi answers:

"Three years."

Mu-chou then asks:

"Have you ever consulted the master?"

Lin-tsi answers like a novice who knows nothing, but this is because he is well acquainted with the Buddhist sutras and treatises, and he meditates intensely on the essence of the Way:

"No, never. I don't know what to ask him.

Mu-chou suggests the classic question:

"Why don't you ask him what the great idea of Buddhism is?"

Lin-tsi follows the advice, before he has even finished his sentence, Huang-po beats him. He comes out of the interview, Mu-chou, who is very interested in the affair, comes to the news:

"What about your question?"

Lin-tsi reports candidly:

"I haven't finished asking the question, the master beat me, I didn't understand.

Mu-chou encourages him:

"You should ask him again."

Lin-tsi returns to Huang-po, he is beaten a second time. Mu-chou encourages him to persevere, Lin-tsi returns to Huang-po, he is beaten a third time. Distraught and desperate, he went to see Mu-chou:

"Out of kindness and compassion you advised me to consult the master." Three times I asked the question, three times I was beaten. I am sad that my past actions prevent me from grasping the profound teaching. Today I come to take my leave.

Mu-chou did not expect such a turn of events, he is quite annoyed and asks Lin-tsi to greet the master before leaving. In the meantime, he goes to Huang-po's house to warn him:

"The monk who questioned you really lives the Dharma. When he comes to bid you farewell, use a skilful means to receive him. Well pruned and carved, it will become a large tree that will give freshness to the whole world.

Huang-po replied curtly:

"I already know.

Of course, Huang-po already knows exactly who Lin-tsi is, he already knows exactly what he has to do, he already knows exactly what he's doing, and he already knows exactly what he needs to say. Mu-chou had experienced enlightenment but he has not yet inherited Huang-po's Eye of the Dharma, he does not dare to intervene but he himself does not understand the relentless harshness of the master. It can be said that the enlightenment of Lin-tsi will quite logically trigger the great awakening of Mu-chou, who will then include the Steep Way of Huang-po.

Lin-tsi comes to take his leave, Huang-po remains in his position, he is torn internally but he does not show it. In a voice as neutral and cold as possible, he recommends to his beloved disciple:

"You shouldn't go anywhere else, go straight to Kao-an to the meditation master Ta-yu, and talk to him for you."

Huang-po does not speak, but he already knows in advance that Ta-yu, his first cousin in the Way, will speak. We shall see in the chapter devoted to Master Kouei-tsung Chih-chang that Lin-tsi must absolutely go to Ta-yu's house and nowhere else, precisely because Ta-yu himself had been beaten by his master Kouei-tsung. Huang-po may have copied Kouei-tsung, but he copied so wonderfully that it was a masterful reinvention.

Lin-tsi arrives at Ta-yu's house, who asks him:

"Where do you come from?"

Lin-tsi answers:

"I come from Huang-po's."

Ta-yu inquires about the latest news:

"What does Huang-po teach the monks?"

Lin-tsi hardly thinks of instructions in general, he is bruised deep down and he does not digest the three series of blows with the stick:

"Three times I have asked for the great idea of Buddhism, three times I have been beaten. I don't know if I made a mistake or not.

Ta-yu is truly the man for the job: he had been a disciple beaten by his master, he knows the disease, he knows the remedy, and above all he knows the benefits of healing!

After examining the patient in the twinkling of an eye, the doctor Ta-yu makes the treatment swallow:

"Old grandmother Huang-po has gone to such lengths for you, and you have come to ask me if you have made a mistake or not!"

Instantly Lin-tsi opens his eyes, everything is illuminated before him, he understands Ta-yu, he understands Huang-po, he understands himself. He declares with superb assurance:

— There has always been little in Huang-po's Buddhism.

Ta-yu, who had experienced this moment of revelation himself, does not want to waste the opportunity and let the rice cook halfway. He grabs Lin-tsi and shouts to him:

"You demon who pisses under the bed, you have just said 'fault or no fault', and now you pretend that there is not much in Huang-po's Buddhism! What principle have you understood, say quickly, say quickly!"

Without saying anything, Lin-tsi punches Ta-yu three times in the abdomen, who releases him. His task successfully completed, Ta-yu washes his hands:

"Your master is Huang-po, it doesn't concern me."

Lin-tsi thanks Ta-yu and returns to Huang-po. The walk to Kao-an was absolutely necessary, Kao-an and nowhere else!

Huang-po sees Lin-tsi returning, he pretends not to notice his disciple's new state of mind:

"This fellow is always coming and going, when will he understand perfectly?"

Lin-tsi doesn't care about the spade: he understands and that's what counts, it doesn't matter if someone doubts his understanding. He responds with a metaphor:

"The grandmother's heart is too good, the matter is over."

Huang-po asks:

"Where do you come from?"

Lin-tsi plays the innocent:

"The other day I obeyed you and went to consult Ta-yu.

Huang-po wants to know the details:

"What did Ta-yu say?"

Lin-tsi relates what had happened at Kao-an, Huang-po feigns annoyance:

"Old Ta-yu has given away the fuse, when he comes, he will receive a beating."

Lin-tsi does not hesitate for a moment:

"Why wait?" The beating is for now.

He approaches Huang-po from behind and slaps his master. How sure Lin-tsi is of himself and how sure of his master! The reliability of the master is the sine qua non condition in Chan!

Huang-po laughed:

"That madman who comes to my house to tear off the tiger's goatee!"

Lin-tsi screams, his career as a great crier for eternity begins that day in front of his master. Huang-po called his secretary:

"Take that madman to the meditation room."

All is well that ends well.

Huang-po gives Lin-tsi total freedom of tone and movement. One summer, Lin-tsi returns in the middle of retirement. Seeing Huang-po reading a sutra, he ironically disdainfully:

"I'll tell people you're an old monk who grinds black beans."

Lin-tsi stayed a few days and then took his leave, Huang-po remarked to him:

"You are already breaking the rules when you reach the middle of the retreat, why don't you finish it before you leave?"

Lin-tsi makes fun of the rules:

"I've just come to greet you."

Huang-po defeated him once again and chased him away, Lin-tsi went a long way, changed his mind and came back to finish the retreat. Even an enlightened monk is not always right, and of course, he is not right about everything either. The patriarchs themselves dare not claim infallibility!

Another year, Lin-tsi is getting ready to set off again. Huang-po asks him:

"Where are you going?"

Lin-tsi says:

"If not in Ho-nan, it will be in Ho-peh."

Huang-po beats him, Lin-tsi grabs the stick and slaps his master. Huang-po bursts out laughing and calls his secretary:

"Bring the meditation stick and cushion of my master Pai-chang."

Lin-tsi guesses that he is going to inherit these objects of the transmission of the faith, he exclaims:

"Secretary, bring the fire."

Huang-po understood that his disciple wanted to assert his total freedom, but he said to him:

"In spite of that, take these objects with you, later they will help you silence the evil tongues."

And so it was that Huang-po consecrated Lin-tsi as one of his twelve successors.

Lin-tsi will be one of the most admired and beloved masters throughout the centuries.

## THE SIXTH PATRIARCH HOUEI-NENG

( 638 - 713 )

Most living beings, including humans, have in common the refusal of the same truth, that of our original ignorance. We can summarize this attitude in a formula: "I think I know, I am happy." Some people, intelligent and gifted, even contract Shen-ting syndrome, which we will see in detail in the chapter devoted to the master Shi-shuang Chu-yuan. This syndrome can be described by a shorthand: "I know more than the others, I am satisfied."

The sacred mission, and the great work, of a Buddha is to bring all beings to the vision, to the understanding of the Buddhas. The teaching of Sakyamuni Buddha and Buddhist masters is to help all beings to experience enlightenment and achieve enlightenment, to become Buddhas themselves. The difficulty lies in inventing skillful and appropriate means to encourage beings to overcome their denial of the truth, which is a crippling obstacle to serious learning and daily practice.

The Chan School of Buddhism is in the continuity of Sakyamuni Buddha, it has a particularity and a message of its own, its followers call it the School of Meditation, Tchan-tsung, or the School of the Heart-Mind, Hsin-tsung. And it is also and above all the Southern School of the Sixth Patriarch Houei-neng, to whom the genealogies of all the masters of transmission can be traced.

For us, he is a real personage, better still, he is our venerated ancestor, the true founder of our school, whose particularity is the transmission of the "Treasury of the Eye of the True Law" from the mind of the master to the spirit of the disciple, without alteration through the generations, and whose proper message is the "Chan of the Patriarchs", which the masters of Chan each practice in his own way, according to his personal temperament.

The episodes in the life of the Sixth Patriarch Houei-neng perfectly illustrate this peculiarity and this message, starting with the prerequisite for any learning process: the awareness, recognition and acceptance of our ignorance. "I don't know, I have something to learn," sincerity and humility are the primary qualities of a disciple of the Chan.

Fatherless, Houei-neng lives in poverty with his mother. He cuts or collects wood in the forest to sell at the market. One day, on his way to deliver to a customer, he heard someone recite the Diamond Sutra. He feels like he understands something and inquires. He was told that it was the Diamond Sutra that came from the Fifth Patriarch Hung-jen of the Eastern Mountain Monastery.

Since that day, Houei-neng has never ceased to entertain the idea of studying the Way, but his mother's fate makes him hesitate. A generous client offers to provide for her needs, the young man sets off.

He arrived at the monastery and presented himself before the Fifth Patriarch:

"Where do you come from?"

Houei-neng replies simply:

"I come from Ling-nan."

Hung-jen asks:

"What do you come here to seek?"

Walking for a month, Houei-neng had time to think and reflect on his true purpose:

"I only want to become a Buddha."

Without seeming to touch it, Hung-jen sets a trap:

"The people of Ling-nan don't have Buddha nature, how can you become a Buddha?"

This is his first meeting with his master, Houei-neng does not let himself be discouraged by this little admission test, he seizes the opportunity to show a little of his state of mind and his understanding of the moment:

"There are people from the South and people from the North, but how can Buddha nature be differentiated in the South and in the North?"

"Go and work in the kitchens."

In obedience to this order, Houei-neng went to live among the lay brothers, chopping wood and pounding rice, with quiet diligence.

One day, Hung-jen goes to the kitchen and approaches Houei-neng. He confirms to her: "I know your mental agility, but for fear of being harmed, I don't speak to you. Do you know?"

Houei-neng replies without hesitation:

"I understand that, master.

The Fifth Patriarch lives in the midst of five hundred monks who claim to be all his disciples. But how many of them know how to take advantage of his presence and availability to question him about the Way and to deepen the Dharma? Concerned about the future of his lineage, he suddenly receives a boy who appears out of nowhere and wants to learn. How can he let such an opportunity pass him by and not do absolutely all that is necessary to educate the future patriarch? The relationship between the master and the disciple has from the outset placed itself in an ideal condition, it is all sincerity, trust and mutual understanding. Hung-jen's perspicacity is often praised for detecting the early gifts of the young Houei-neng, but was not the comparison greatly facilitated by the intellectual laziness and lack of energy of the monks of Huang-mei?

The rest is now well known, we will examine together only the salient points of Houei-neng's training, these are the founding acts of the Southern School.

Eight months after Houei-neng's arrival, sensing the right moment, Hung-jen asked all his disciples to present a stanza expressing their understanding. And he promises the transmission of the Dharma, the robe and the bowl to the one who has penetrated the inner knowledge, who has seen his true nature.

No monk has enough confidence in himself to compose a stanza, all leave this task to their chief Shen-siou who in any case will be the legitimate and official successor of the Fifth Patriarch.

Shen-siou suddenly finds himself confronted with his truth and his destiny, he manages to write a quatrain but does not dare to hand it over to Hung-jen. He inscribes it on a wall, visible to everyone:

*The body is the tree of bodhi  
The mind is the stand of the shining mirror  
It must be wiped off again and again  
So that the dust of the world does not settle there.*

Hung-jen read the poem, praised it, and recommended the monks to learn it by heart in order to put it into practice. Then he privately summons Shen-siou and asks him for another stanza, proving that he has truly crossed the threshold and deserves to receive the patriarchate.

A few days later, Houei-neng heard a novice recite the stanza of Shen-siou aloud. He immediately grasps the author's state of mind and the difference in understanding of the Dharma that exists between the two. He goes to the corridor and, not knowing how to read or write, asks a visitor present to write his stanza on the wall:

*Bodhi never has a tree  
The glossy mirror also has no stand  
Since the beginning not a single thing has existed  
Where does the dust of the world settle?*

Houei-neng returns to work in the kitchens, as if nothing had happened. His poem arouses emotion in his readers, it is a scathing response to Shen-siou's stanza, and moreover it faithfully fits into the orthodoxy of the Mahayana teaching of emptiness. The news spread quickly, Hung-jen went to the scene and immediately deleted this quatrain, claiming that its author had not seen his true nature either.

The days go by, Shen-siou feels backed into a corner but can't produce a second stanza. Hung-jen went to see Houei-neng in the kitchen and asked him:

"Is the rice white?"

Houei-neng understands the meaning of the question, he replies that he is ready:

"It is already white, but it is not yet winnowed."

With his stick, Hung-jen hits the mortar three times and then leaves. That same night, on the third watch, Houei-neng discreetly entered his master's room. Hung-jen then commented on the Diamond Sutra and especially the following passage:

*"Subhuti asks the Buddha:*

*"How to fix the mind?"*

*The Buddha answers:*

*"The mind must not be fixed on form, sound, smell, taste, touch, or thought. When the mind is not fixed anywhere, the true spirit appears. »*

At this last sentence Houei-neng knows the great awakening and he immediately reports it to Hung-jen:

*"Who would suspect that our own nature is intrinsically pure and calm,*

*Who would suspect that our own nature intrinsically is without birth or destruction,*

*Who would suspect that our own nature intrinsically is complete,*

*Who would suspect that our own nature intrinsically is without agitation,*

*Who would suspect that our own intrinsic nature produces the ten thousand phenomena? »*

These five clear and precise propositions not only demonstrate the intuitive or intellectual understanding of the sutra, Houei-neng really saw its true nature, which he was able to describe perfectly to the Fifth Patriarch.

What a joy for Hung-jen, the long-awaited moment has finally arrived! The Sixth Patriarch is there before him, in flesh and blood, and he has integrated into his being the specificity of the lineage.

There is no need for any more night sessions, Hung-jen hands over the robe and bowl to Houei-neng, making him his direct successor. He also dictates his recommendations for the future before taking him to the pier.

In the night master and disciple leave the monastery and descend from the mountain to the river. Hung-jen pushes a boat and begins to row. Houei-neng seized the oars, saying: "Master, let me row."

Hung-jen answers:

"I have to take you across."

Houei-neng plays on the double meaning, the crossing of the river and the crossing to the other bank, the shore of awakening:

"When I was full of illusions, you made me cross. Now that I have realized the Way, I must cross by myself.

Hung-jen unreservedly approves:

"That's it, that's it.

Happiness does not last long, Houei-neng gone, Hung-jen crosses the river again, climbs the mountain and returns to the monastery. For the love of his disciple, for the continuity of his lineage, for the development of the school, for the propagation of Buddhism, the Fifth Patriarch did not measure his efforts or spare his pains!

For several days Hung-jen remained in his room and did not show himself. Monks come to hear the news:

"Master, are you unwell or have you any worries?"

Hung-jen told them the truth:

"I'm not sick, but the dress and the bowl have gone south."

The monks remember Houei-neng's poem but they want confirmation:

"Who received the Dharma transmission?"

"Neng has received it."

Immediately, dozens of monks set out in pursuit of the Sixth Patriarch. Obeying only their impulses of frustration and anger, they do not realize that in doing so they are openly opposing Hung-jen's decision. It is as if in their eyes the master had become a spoiled old man and had become infatuated with a stranger, depriving the legitimate heirs of the family inheritance, for the benefit of a miserable stranger. For them, Hung-jen had been deceived, his confidence had been abused, Houei-neng is nothing but an impostor, a usurper, the thief of the robe and the bowl, priceless symbols of patriarchy.

Of the thirteen sufferings stated by the Buddha, the sixth is to live far from the beings we love. Hung-jen loves Houei-neng but he will never see him again. The fifth suffering is to live among people you don't like or no longer love. Hung-jen loves all these monks who are indeed his disciples, but they do not understand him, and during the three years that remain to him, few monks come to him to enlighten them on the Way.

In his hasty flight from jealous and envious fellow students, Houei-neng is caught by the monk Houei-ming, a former army officer. Houei-neng places the robe and bowl on a rock and hides in the brushwood. Houei-ming hesitated for a moment and then changed his mind, shouting:

"Brother Lai, I come for the Dharma, not for the robe.

Houei-neng then came out of hiding, Houei-ming greeted him and asked for a lesson. Houei-neng asks his interlocutor to calm down and not to wander in his thoughts. After a moment's silence, Houei-neng asked his question, which has since remained in our annals:

"Without thinking of good, without thinking of evil, what is the original face of the monk Ming?"

This apparently ordinary phrase is the first koan of Houei-neng and of the Southern School, and it is enough to plunge Houei-ming into inner silence and thoughtlessness. When he comes to himself, that is to say, when he emerges from the state of non-thought, or as soon as his discursive thought resumes its course, he becomes aware that he has perceived his true nature, that he has really entered the Way. One last doubt remains, however, he questions Houei-neng:

"Apart from this instruction, are there any other secret teachings?"

"Since I have told you, it is not a secret. If you think within yourself, then the secret is within you.

Houei-neng thus confirms to him that this is the essence of the teaching he himself had received from their master, the great wisdom and knowledge cited in the sutras will flow naturally and spontaneously.

Houei-ming then presents his new understanding:

"I lived in Huang-mei for a long time, but in truth I did not yet see my original face clearly. Now, thanks to your instruction, I am like one who drinks water and knows for himself whether it is fresh or hot.

He really understood, he no longer doubts. Then he adds with gratitude:

"To-day you are my master."

This sudden conversion took Houei-neng a little off guard, he preferred to keep the status quo for both of them:

"Since you see, you understand, let us both venerate the master of Huang-mei, and take good care of yourselves."



Houei-neng took his leave, he continued his return to the South. Houei-ming joined the other pursuers and directed them on other paths. Later he changed his monk name to Tao-ming, out of pure respect for the Sixth Patriarch, thus avoiding having the same first character Houei.

For fifteen years, on the recommendation and blessing of the Fifth Patriarch, Houei-neng will remain hidden in the mountains, among the hunters, to deepen the Dharma and to advance peacefully in the Way. This period of maturation — absolutely necessary — allows him to prepare for his return to the century. His life and his practice are one, he integrates into his being all the particularity and all the message proper to the school. Having inherited the robe and the bowl, however, he must humbly and joyfully accept the difficulties and vicissitudes of his destiny. Above all, he must learn to seize opportunities instantaneously to sow the seeds of enlightenment in his interlocutors, rectify their erroneous views, give them the subtlest and highest teachings, and transmit the Buddha's Dharma to them according to their abilities. This period is ultimately for him the blessed time of humble and simple tasks, untroubled by the complications inherent in our human nature.

His deeds, gestures, and words are recorded in the Platform Sutra, and we can all usefully refer to them without having to dwell on them here. His life already reveals all the essential characteristics of the Southern School, the long history of the school will show enrichments and deepenings, trial and error too.

## MU-CHOU TAO-MING

A little monk from childhood, a monk at the age of 21, Mu-chou conformed to the discipline and studied the Tripitaka. Chief of the monks at Huang-po, he recognized in Lin-tsi a future giant of Chan and urged him to question the master.

After receiving the transmission, he erases all traces of him and returns to live at Chai-yuan Temple, near his mother's house. He made straw sandals to feed her or to leave them at night in front of the doors of poor houses.

Many monks come to consult him, his answers are enigmatic and indigestible. All the masters admire him, but most monks fear him because they don't understand him.

One day Mu-chou asked a monk:

"Where do you come from?"

The monk shouts, Mu-chou pretends to be impressed:

"You got me with your cry."

The monk cried out again, and Mu-chou said to him:

"After three or four cries, what will you do?"

The monk is distraught and silent, Mu-chou provokes him:

"Ignorant bandit!"

This anecdote is extremely tasty because this unconscious monk tries to imitate Lin-tsi's cries. Now Mu-chou is the elder brother of Lin-tsi in the Way, I doubt whether Lin-tsi himself would have dared to cry out in Mu-chou's face.

Often, from the top of the platform, Mu-chou said to the monks:

"The great matter is not yet cleared up, it is like going to your mother's funeral." The big matter is already clear, it's like going to your mother's funeral.

Before or after enlightenment, it is always the same seriousness and the same rigor.

## PA-CHIAO HOU EI-CHING

Of Korean origin, Pa-chiao is one of the five successors of Nan-ta Kuang-yun. He himself will appoint four successors.

Pa-chiao is famous for a sentence that will be quoted by Wou-men Houei-kai in the Wou-men-kuan:

"If you have a stick, then I will give you a stick." If you don't have a stick, then I'll snatch your stick from you.

This statement is a hua-tou that cuts off the tip of the tongue of the whole world. It also gives us a pretext to briefly touch on the question of elitism in the Tchan.

Affection and personal preference must never interfere in the education of disciples. A master worthy of the name trains indifferently the disciples he adores and the disciples he loves less.

But a pretentious disciple who thinks he knows does not question, nor does a disciple who is convinced that he will never understand question. Where determination and effort are needed, disciples come up against futile obstacles.