

# The Ultimate Reality Transcends What Can Be Expressed in Words

(From "The Teachings of the Compassionate Buddha," edited by Edwin A. Burt, c 1955, p. 194-204)

*The document, here employed, in abbreviated form, presents the teaching of Hsi Yun, one of the Ch'an (or Zen) masters who lived about 840 A.D. His teaching is reported by P'ei Hsiu, an official and scholar who became a student under Hsi Yun. It gives a more or less sympathetic disclosure of Ch'an philosophy.*

*First it defends the doctrine with which we are now familiar, that universal mind alone is real. This result is then used to explain why one must abandon seeking for anything; universal mind is realized by the cessation of all seeking and by leaving behind the analytic discriminations it uses and trusts. This step is achieved in a flash of sudden awakening.*

*But at this point the argument shifts. The reader is supposed to be ready now to see that mind itself, and the categories by which it has been explained, are self contradictory. The real truth lies behind any kind of verbal expression. The conclusion is ruthlessly applied even to such central Buddhist ideas as that of the Dharma. Buddha was, of course, aware of the truth of these matters, but in his compassion he communicated partial insights; their purpose was to lead people to a stage where they could achieve this fuller realization.*

*Again comes a shift, this time the completely non-rational technique of using words, not to answer an observer's question, but to discourage him from asking it. It is hoped that he may now be able to attain the awareness that the real difficulty lies not so much in his questions being unanswerable as in his continuing state of mind that leads him in asking them. This state - in the confidence of analytic reason - is precisely that out of which he needs to awaken.*

*The procedure of this essay constitutes as dramatic a challenge to the presuppositions of Western philosophy as well can be imagined.*

*by Edwin A. Burt*

The Master said to me: "All the Buddhas and all the sentient beings are nothing but the universal mind, besides which nothing exists. This mind, which has always existed, is unborn and indestructible. It is not green or yellow, and has neither form nor appearance. It does not belong to the categories of things that exist or do not exist, nor can it be reckoned as being new or old. It is neither long nor short, big nor small, but transcends all limits, measures, names, speech, and every method of treating it concretely. It is the substance you see before you - begin to reason about it and you at once fall into error. It is like the boundless void, which cannot be fathomed or measured. This universal mind alone is the Buddha and there is no distinction between the Buddha and sentient beings, but sentient beings are attached to particular forms and so seek for Buddhahood outside it. By their very seeking for it they produce a contrary effect of losing it, for that is using the Buddha to seek the Buddha and using the mind to grasp mind. Even though they do their utmost for a full kalpa, they will not be able to attain it. They do not know how to put a stop to their thoughts and forget their anxiety. The Buddha is directly before them, for this (universal) mind is the Buddha and the Buddha is all living beings. It is not the less for being manifested in ordinary beings, nor is it greater for being manifested in the Buddha.

"As to the merits, countless as the sands of the Ganges, which come from performing the six paramitas (perfect duties) and vast numbers of similar practices, since you are fundamentally complete in every respect, you should not try to supplement that perfection with meaningless practices. When there is occasion for them, perform acts of charity, and, when the occasion has passed, remain quiescent. If you are not absolutely convinced that this [mind] is the Buddha, and are attached to the forms, practices and performances whereby merit is achieved, your way of thinking has no connection with reality and is quite incompatible with the Way.

"The mind IS the Buddha, nor is there any other Buddha or any other mind. It is bright and spotless as the void, having no form or appearance whatsoever. To make use of the mind to think [in the ordinary sense of the word] is to leave the substance and attach yourself to forms. The Buddha who has always existed exhibits no such attachment to forms. To practice the six paramitas and a myriad similar practices with the intention of becoming a Buddha thereby is to advance by stages, but the Buddha who has always existed is not a Buddha of stages. Only awake to the universal mind, and realize that there is nothing whatsoever to be attained. This is the real Buddha. The Buddha and all sentient beings are the universal mind and nothing else....

"The universal mind is no mind [in the ordinary sense of the word] and is completely detached from form. So it is with the Buddhas and sentient beings. If they (the latter) can only rid themselves of analytic thinking (mentation) they will have accomplished everything.

"The original Buddha-nature, in all truth, is nothing which can be apprehended. It is void, omniscient, silent, pure; it is glorious and mysterious peacefulness, and that is all which can be said. You yourself must awake to it, fathoming its depths. That which is before you is it in all its entirety and with nothing whatsoever lacking. Even if you go through all the stages of a Bodhisattva's

progress towards Buddhahood, stage by stage, when at least, by single flash of thought, you attain to full realization, you will only be realizing your original Buddha-nature and by all the forgoing stages, you will not have added a single thing to it. You will merely regard those kalpas of work and achievement as nothing but unreal actions performed in a dream.....

“The pure mind, the source of everything, shines on all with the brilliance of its own perfection, but the people of the world do not awake to it regarding only that which sees, hears, feels and knows as mind. Because their understanding is veiled by their own sight, hearing, feeling, and knowledge, they do not perceive the spiritual brilliance of the original substance. If they could only eliminate all the analytic thinking (mentation) in a flash that original substance would manifest itself like the sun ascending through the void and illuminating the whole universe without hindrance or bounds. Therefore, if students of the Way only regard seeing, hearing, feeling and knowing as their [proper] activities, upon being deprived of these perceptions, their way towards [an understanding of] mind is cut off and they find nowhere to enter. You have but to recognize that the real mind is expressed in these perceptions, but is not dependent on them on the one hand, nor separate from them on the other. You should not start reasoning from such perceptions, nor allow your thinking to stem from them, yet you should refrain from seeking universal mind apart from them or abandoning them in your pursuit of the Dharma. Neither hold to them, abandon them, dwell in them, nor cleave to them, but exist independently of analytic all that is above, below, or around you. For there is nowhere in which the way cannot be followed.

“When the people of the world listen for the Way, all the Buddhas proclaim the doctrine of universal mind. If it is held that there is something to be attained apart from mind and, thereupon, mind is used to seek it, [that implies] a failure to understand that the mind and the object of its search are one. Mind cannot be used to seek something from mind, for even after the passage of millions of kalpas, the day of success would never come. Such a method cannot be compared to immediately putting a stop to all analytic thinking (mentation), which is the fundamental dharma. Suppose a warrior, who did not realize he was wearing a pearl (which he thought to be lost) on his forehead, were to seek it elsewhere; though he were to traverse the whole universe, he would never find it. But if a knowing fellow were to point it out to him, he would immediately realize that it was in its old place. Therefore, if students of the Way are mistaken about their own real mind, not recognizing it as the Buddha, they will accordingly seek elsewhere, indulging in various practices and achievements, and relying on such graduated progress to attain realization. But after eons of diligent searching, they will still be unable to attain the Way.

“Such methods cannot compare with immediately putting a stop to all analytic thinking (mentation), in the certain knowledge that there is nothing that has absolute existence, nothing on which to lay hold, nothing on which to rely, nothing in which to abide, nothing subjective or objective. It is by not allowing wrong thinking to take place that you will realize Bodhi (Illumination) and, at the moment of realization, you will but be realizing the Buddha who has always existed in your own mind. Kalpas of striving will be realized to have been so much wasted effort, just as when the warrior found the pearl, he merely discovered what had been on his own forehead all the time, and just as his finding of it was not dependent on his efforts to find it elsewhere....

“If students of the Way desire to become Buddhas, they need no study anything of the Dharma whatsoever. They should only study how to avoid seeking for or clinging to anything. If nothing is sought, the mind will remain in its ‘unborn’ state and, if nothing is clung to, the mind will not go through the process of destruction. That which is neither born nor destroyed is the Buddha.

The eighty-four thousand methods for counteracting the eighty-four thousand forms of delusion are merely figures of speech for attracting people towards conversion. In fact none of them exist. Relinquishment [of everything] is the Dharma and he who understands this is a Buddha, but the renunciation of ALL delusions leaves no Dharma on which to lay hold.

“If the student of the Way wishes to understand the real mystery, he need only put out of his mind attachment to anything whatsoever. To say that the real Dharmakaya (essential substance) of the Buddha is like the void, it means that it actually is void and that the void is in fact the Dharmakaya.... The void and the Dharmakaya do not differ from each other, neither do sentient beings and the Buddha, the phenomenal world and Nirvana, or delusion and Bodhi. When all such forms are left behind, that is the Buddha. Ordinary people look outwards, while followers of the Way look into their own minds, but the real Dharma is to forget both the external and the internal. The former is easy enough, the latter very difficult. Men are afraid to forget their own minds, fearing to fall through the void with nothing to which they can cling. They do not know that the void is not really void, but the real realm of the Dharma. This spiritually enlightened nature is without beginning or end, as old as space, neither subject to birth or destruction, neither existing nor non-existing, neither defiled nor pure, neither clamorous nor silent, neither old nor young, occupying no space, having neither inside nor outside, size nor form, color nor sound. It cannot be looked for nor sought, comprehended by wisdom nor knowledge, explained in words, contacted materially or reached by meritorious achievement....

“If a man, when he is about to die, can only regard the five aggregates of his consciousness as void, the four elements which compose his body as not constituting an ego, his true mind as formless and still, his true nature not as something which commenced with his birth and will perish at his death but as remaining utterly motionless, his mind and the objects of his perception as one - if he can only awake to this in a flash and remain free from the entanglements of the Triple World (the past, present and future), he

will indeed be one who leaves the world without the faintest tendency towards rebirth. If he should behold the lovely sight of all the Buddhas coming to welcome him, surrounded by every kind of splendor, and yet feel no desire to go towards them; if he should behold all sorts of evil forms around him and yet have no feeling of fear, but remain oblivious of self and at one with the Absolute, he will indeed achieve the formless state....

“Since the mind of the Bodhisattva is like the void, everything is relinquished by it. When analytic thinking (mentation) concerning the past does not take place, that is relinquishment of the past. When thinking (mentation) concerning the present does not take place, that is relinquishment of the present. When analytic thinking (mentation) concerning the future does not take place, that is relinquishment of the future. This is called the complete relinquishment of the Triple World.

“Since the time that the Tathagata entrusted Kasyapa with the Dharma until now, the mystical transmission has been from mind to mind, yet these minds were identical with each other. A transmission of void cannot be made through words, and any transmission in concrete terms cannot be that of the Dharma. Hence the mystical transmission is made from mind to mind and those minds were identical with each other. It is hard to come into contact with either one who is capable of transmitting or with that which is transmitted, so that few have received this doctrine.

“In fact, however, mind is not really mind and the reception of transmission is not really reception...

“When the Tathagata was alive, he wished to preach the Vehicle of the Truth, but people would not have believed him and, by scoffing at him, would have become immersed in the sea of sorrow. On the other hand, if he had said nothing, that would have been selfishness, and he would not have been able to spread widely the knowledge of the mysterious Way for the benefit of all sentient beings. So he adapted the expedient teaching of the Three Vehicles (Sravaka, Pratyekabuddha and Buddha Vehicles). As, however, these Vehicles include both the greater and the lesser, unavoidably there is both shallowness and depth (in the teaching as a whole). None of them represents the real Dharma. So it is said that there is only a One-Vehicle Way for, wherever there is division into this or that, there is no truth. However, there is no way of expressing universal mind. Therefore the Tathagata called Kasyapa to the Seat of the Law and commanded him to practice this branch of the Dharma separately, saying that, when a silent understanding of it is obtained, the state of Buddhahood is reached.”

“Regarding the Dhyana (Ch’an or Zen) Sect of ours, since the doctrine was first transmitted, it has never been taught that people should seek [empirical] knowledge or look for explanations of things. We merely talk about ‘studying the Way’ using the phrase as a term to arouse people’s interest. In fact, the Way cannot be studied. If concepts based on [factual] study are retained, they only result in the Way being misunderstood.”....

Question: “Since there is nothing on which to lay hold, how should the Dharma be transmitted?”

Answer: “It is transmitted from mind to mind.”

Question: “If mind is used for this purpose, how can it be said that mind does not exist?”

Answer: “Obtaining absolutely nothing is called receiving transmission from mind to mind.”

Question: “If there is no mind and no Dharma, what is meant by ‘transmission’?”

Answer: “It is because you people on hearing of transmission from mind to mind, take it to mean that there is something to be obtained, that Bodhidharma said:

“ The nature of the mind, when understood,  
No human word can compass or disclose.  
Enlightenment is naught to be obtained,  
And he that gains it does not say he knows.’

“If I were to make this clear to you, I doubt you could stand up to such knowledge.”....

“If you will now and at all times, whether walking, standing sitting, or lying, only concentrate on eliminating analytic thinking (mentation), at long last you will inevitably discover the truth. Because your strength is insufficient, you may be unable to leap

beyond the phenomenal sphere with a single jump but, after three, five, or perhaps ten years, you will certainly have made a good beginning and be able to go of your own accord. It is because you are not capable of this [eliminating of analytic thinking (mentation)] that [you feel] the necessity of using the mind to ‘study Dhyana’ and ‘study the Way.’ How will the Dharma be able to help you? So it is said: ‘All that was spoken by the Tathagata was for the purpose of influencing men.’ It was like using yellow leaves for gold to stop the crying child, and was decidedly not real. If you take it for something real, you are not one of our sect, and, moreover, what relation can it have to your real self? So the sutra says: ‘[To know that] in reality there is not the smallest thing which can be grasped is called supreme, perfect wisdom.’ If you can understand this meaning, you will see that the Way of the Buddhas and the way of the devil are equally wrong. In reality, everything is pure and glistening, neither square nor round, big nor small, long nor short; it is beyond passion and phenomena, ignorance and Enlightenment.”....

Stepping into the public hall, [His Reverence] said:

“The knowledge of many things cannot compare for the excellence with giving up the search. The sage is one who puts himself outside the range of objectivity. There are not different kinds of mind, and there is no doctrine which can be taught.”

As there was no more to be said, everybody went away...