

# What is Your Original Face?

by Kokyo Henkel

In the *Platform Sutra of the Sixth Ancestor*, one of the great classics of early Zen in China, the Sixth Chinese Zen Ancestor, Huineng, tells the story about how he received the Dharma robe and bowl from the Fifth Ancestor. Then he was pursued by jealous monks who chased him up into the mountains, trying to re-claim the Fifth Ancestor's robe and bring it back home. "Several hundred people came after me," Huineng says, "wanting to take the robe and bowl away" This is how things were in the old days, and still occasionally are today. "One monk named Huiming, formerly an army general, and a rough-and-ready kind of person, joined in the pursuit with extreme enthusiasm. He chased me down before anyone else."

Huineng put the robe on a rock and said, "This robe represents trust. Is it appropriate to struggle over it?" Huiming went over to the robe and tried to pick it up, but he couldn't move it. Then he said to Huineng, "I've come for the Dharma, not for the robe." I think this is one of the greatest moments of the story. He spent so much effort, days and days with a whole army of monks searching for Huineng in the mountains. But when he finally gets to this moment and hears that the robe represents trust, and he tries to pick it up, he can't. Is it because suddenly the robe becomes heavy? Is it Huineng's magical power that he could make it immovable? Or is it just because Huiming, who had previously been an army general but was now a monk, was practicing Zen for some reason, and maybe had forgotten why during this long chase? At that moment his mind suddenly clarified: "What am I doing?! I've come all this way but what am I doing here? This is ridiculous!" Something turned in him. How quickly it's possible to shift when encountering the truth of the immediate present. Huineng goes on, "Huiming came forward and said, 'Please explain the Dharma to me.'"

Huineng then said, "Since you have come here for the Dharma, you should let go of all mental objects, everything you're thinking about, particularly the robe and bowl, if you're thinking about them. Let go of all these objects and not conceive a single thought. Then I will expound the teaching for you." After Huiming was silent for a while, Huineng said, "When you don't think of good and you don't think of bad, what is your original face?" And at these words, Huiming was greatly awakened. Not thinking good, not thinking bad, not thinking in these dualistic terms, letting go of all our usual assessments and judgments about the world, at such a time, what is your original face? An expanded version of this meditative inquiry asks, "What was your original face before your parents were born?" The words "original face" already say it all, but just to clarify we can add in the part about "before your parents were born." If "original face" seems kind of abstract, especially if you've heard it a bunch of times in Zen talks, or if you start to identify the words with something about this skin thing up front here, one can say "before you were born," or even up the ante a little bit, and say "before your parents were born." Try to get ahold of that! Before your parents were born, who were you? This is not meant to be a scientific question you try to figure out; it's that truly taking up such an inquiry with deep sincerity and beginner's mind may turn the mind back to its ungraspable nature.

As a meditation instruction, we can actually look at this as a two-part process. There are two aspects of Buddhist meditation: the calming, settling aspect, and the seeing, insight aspect. This brief instruction of Huineng is a Zen version of *shamatha* and *vipashyana*, calm abiding and

insight. “Do not think of good and bad. At this time, what is your original face?” These two sentences are a streamlined Zen version of these two sides of meditation. Not thinking good and bad is just temporarily letting go of our usual thoughts about the things of the world. Not just good and bad, but all kinds of thoughts and dualistic judgments that we produce all day long, to a greater or lesser degree. So we can just sit still, sit upright, breathe deeply, relax completely. If “don't think of” feels a little too forceful or admonishing, we can say, “Just release these thoughts about good and bad, right and wrong, early and late, cold and hot; relax the mind around all these assessments of the situation.” The more we can do that, the more we really let go of such thoughts, the more the mind settles down, and becomes calm and still.

Some people might take that as the whole of zazen: settling into this present, barely thinking, relaxed mind, but I would propose that this is only the first aspect of meditation, the calm abiding side. And when we're settled into not thinking of good and bad and so on, then we can investigate: what is our original face? This is also called turning the light of awareness around to shine back on the source of mind, on the nature of mind. This is a little different than just letting go of the thoughts of this and that. It's a little bit more curious, intentional, investigative, or inquiring. It's actually turning awareness back and looking. We might even say the first step is not thinking, and the second step is look back at what it is that's not thinking. Or, if there is some thinking, look back at what's thinking. And what do we find there? What we find is the unfindable ungraspable nature of mind, totally empty of all characteristics, yet radiantly bright and aware. The nature of mind does not suffer when we suffer, does not feel happy when we feel happy. It is totally free, and never arises or disappears. When we are busy, it's never busy. By recognizing and appreciating it, without trying to grasp it, we can have a completely different perspective on our busy life. Thus such an inquiring meditation practice is offered by our Zen ancestors.

Dogen Zenji says the essential art of zazen is to “think of not thinking” which can also be translated as “think of what is not thinking.” First we practice “not thinking” by letting go of our usual obsessive, discursive thinking, at least to some extent. And then we can “think of what is not thinking.” Turn awareness around and look back at who it is that's not thinking. How do we turn awareness around and look? Not by using our usual thinking mind to figure anything out. Dogen calls this kind of inquiry “nonthinking” or “beyond thinking.” This might sound a little abstract, but it's a practice that can be done, a quite subtle but straightforward practice that seems easier to do, especially at first, during longer retreats or sesshins, when the mind can really settle down, but stay bright and alert as well. “Think of what doesn't think” is the same meditation as “What is your original face before your parents were born?” It seemed to work for Huiming. He was greatly awakened upon asking such a question!

Then Huiming bowed and took leave of his new teacher. When he got to the foot of the mountain, he turned to the crowd of pursuers who had come with him to catch Huineng and said, “I just climbed up to the heights, but I found no trace of him. There's no point in looking any further for him here.”