

Zen Stories Involving the Mahaparinirvana Sutra

Sutra page numbers refer to Kosho Yamamoto translation; stories collected by Kokyo Henkel

Shakyamuni Buddha's Transmission of Dharma to Mahakashyapa (MP Sutra, page 30)

I now leave the unsurpassed Dharma in the hands of Mahakashyapa. You may now rely on him. He will be your refuge.

Huineng's Platform Sutra of the Sixth Ancestor (translated by Red Pine) Platform Sutra, page 122 (MP Sutra, page 299)

(Abbot) Yin-tsung asked me what instructions I had received from Huang-mei. I said, 'I didn't receive any instructions. The only thing he talked about was seeing our nature. He didn't talk about meditation or liberation.'

Yin-tsung said, 'Why didn't he talk about meditation or liberation?'

I said, 'Because these two teachings are not the teaching of buddhas. The teaching of buddhas is a teaching beyond duality.'

Yin-tsung asked, 'What is the teaching of buddhas beyond duality?'

I answered, 'The abbot has been lecturing on the *Nirvana Sutra*, which explains that the buddha nature is the teaching of buddhas beyond duality. For example, when the noble King of Virtue Bodhisattva asked the Buddha, "If someone commits the four serious offenses, or is guilty of the five unpardonable crimes, or is an icchantika (ed. someone who maligns the Dharma and denies their own buddha nature), having cut off their roots of goodness, do they still have the buddha nature?" And the Buddha replied, "There are two kinds of roots of goodness. One is permanent, and the other is impermanent. But the buddha nature is neither permanent nor impermanent."

Thus, what cannot be cut off is what is meant by "beyond duality." There are things in us that are good and things that are bad, but the buddha nature is neither good nor bad. This is what is meant by "beyond duality." Most people view the skandhas and dhatus (ed. Abhidharma categories used in the analysis of reality) differently, but those who are wise understand that their nature is beyond duality. The nature that is beyond duality is the buddha nature.'

When Yin-tsung heard this, he was overjoyed. He bowed and said, 'My explanation of the sutra is like rubble, while your discourse on the meaning is like pure gold.' He then shaved off my hair (ed. The stupa containing his hair is still there, as is the inscription recording the event) and asked me to become his master. Thus, under the bodhi tree (ed. in the courtyard of Fahsing Temple—now called Kuanghsiao Temple), I opened the East Mountain Dharma Gate (ed. the name of the Fifth Patriarch's teaching).'

Platform Sutra, page 281 (MP Sutra, page 22 and 43)

There was a monk named Chih-tao from the town of Nanhai in Kuangchou prefecture (ed. This is now a suburb of the city of Kuangchou and also where Hui-neng lived as a youth) who asked this question, 'Ever since this student left home, I have read the *Nirvana Sutra* now for more than ten years. But I still don't understand what it's really about, and I was hoping the Master might honor me with his instruction.' The Master said, 'What part don't you understand?'

He said, "'All phenomena are impermanent and subject to origination and cessation. But because it involves the cessation of origination and cessation, nirvana is bliss.'" (ed. Chih-tao is quoting from the *Nirvana Sutra*) This is what I'm confused about.'

The Master said, 'What are you confused about?'

He said, 'All beings have two bodies, namely a physical body and a dharma body. The physical body is impermanent and subject to origination and cessation. The dharma body is permanent and doesn't possess any consciousness or feeling. The sutra says, "Because it involves the cessation of origination and cessation, nirvana is bliss." I don't understand which body enters nirvana and which body experiences bliss. If it's the physical body, then when the physical body ceases to exist, the Four Elements disperse. This is truly suffering, and suffering cannot be called "bliss."'

And if it's the dharma body that enters nirvana, then it would be the same as a stick or a rock. So how could it experience bliss? Also, some say our dharma nature is the body of origination and cessation, and the five skandhas are the functions of origination and cessation. With one body, and five functions, origination and cessation continue forever—origination being when functions arise from the body, and cessation being when functions return to the body. But if we admit the existence of rebirth, then life forms would never cease to exist. And if we don't admit the existence of rebirth, then we would forever be in nirvana and would be the same as lifeless forms. Thus, all dharmas would be obstructed by nirvana, and they would never come into existence. How could that be bliss?'

The Master said, 'You're a follower of the Buddha. Why then do you use the mistaken views of permanence and impermanence of other sects and criticize the Dharma of the Supreme Vehicle? According to you, there's a separate dharma body outside the physical body. You seek a nirvana beyond origination and cessation. Also, from "Nirvana is everlasting bliss," you infer that there is a body that experiences it. This is because you cling to birth and death and indulge in mundane pleasures. You should know that it was because all the deluded people in the world mistake the physical body consisting of the five skandhas as their own body, and they discriminate dharmas as forms of external sensation, and they love life and hate death, and they remain unaware that their never-ending thoughts are dreams, illusions, and empty fictions, and they suffer the round of existence in vain and turn the everlasting bliss of nirvana into forms of suffering, and they spend their days running around, the Buddha pitied such beings and taught them the true bliss of nirvana, which at any given moment does not have the appearance of origination and does not have the appearance of cessation, much less the cessation of origination and cessation. Thus, nirvana is right here. But although it is right here, there is no concept of it being here, which is why it is called everlasting bliss. This bliss is not experienced by anyone, nor is it not experienced by anyone. So how could anyone say there is one body and five skandhas much less claim that nirvana obstructs dharmas and keeps them from being born. This is to slander the Buddha and malign the Dharma. Listen to my gatha:

Maha Nirvana is unsurpassed / full, clear, unchanging, still, and bright (ed. five qualities of nirvana)
ordinary fools call it death / other sects claim it's the end
those who follow the Hinayana / think of it as non-action

but these are intellectual musings / based on the sixty-two views (ed. the number of types of delusions)
falsely concocted fictitious names / how could they point to reality

only those who transcend concepts / who reach past grasping and renunciation
who know the dharmas of the skandhas / and the self that dwells among them

who see all material forms outside / every sound and every noise
are equally dreams and illusions / who don't distinguish fool and sage

or try to explain the meaning of nirvana / who put an end to space and time
who use their senses in response / without thinking about their use

who distinguish every dharma / without thinking about distinctions
the kalpa-ending fire can burn up the ocean / the wind can beat down the mountains

the true lasting bliss of nirvana / this is what nirvana is like

I force myself to describe it this way / to make you give up your erroneous views
if you don't try to follow my words / maybe you'll understand just a little.'

When Chih-tao heard this gatha, he experienced a great realization. He leapt to his feet and bowed.

Platform Sutra, page 292 (MP Sutra, page 29)

Hsing-ch'ang said, 'In the past, I received the Master's forgiveness for my crime. Although I have now left home and have been practicing austerities, I'll never be able to repay your kindness, unless I can transmit the Dharma and liberate others. Your disciple has often read the *Nirvana Sutra*, but I don't understand the meaning of permanence and impermanence. May the Master be compassionate enough to explain this a little.'

The Master said, 'What is impermanent is your buddha nature. What is permanent is the mind that discriminates all good and bad dharmas.'

Hsing-ch'ang said, 'But the Master's explanation completely contradicts what the sutra says.'

The Master said, 'I transmit the mind-seal of buddhas. How could I dare contradict the sutras of the Buddha?'

Hsing-ch'ang said, 'But the sutra says that the buddha nature is permanent, and yet the Master says it is impermanent, and that good and bad dharmas, even the bodhi mind, are all impermanent, and yet the Master says they are permanent. These are contradictions and have only made this student even more perplexed.'

The Master said, 'In the past, when I heard the nun Wu-chin-tsang reciting the *Nirvana Sutra*, I explained it to her. And not one of my explanations or interpretations failed to agree with the sutra. Nor is that the case now with you.'

Hsing-ch'ang said, 'This student's intelligence is limited. Could the Master please explain the ins and outs of this?'

The Master said, 'Don't you realize that if the buddha nature, much less any good or bad dharma you can name, is permanent, then between now and the end of the kalpa no one would be able to set their mind on enlightenment. Thus, what I call impermanent is simply what the Buddha calls the Way of True Permanence. Moreover, if dharmas were all impermanent, then the self-nature of everything would be subject to birth and death. But there is no place where the nature that is truly permanent doesn't reach.

Thus, what I call permanent is simply what the Buddha means by true impermanence. Because ordinary people and members of other sects cling to a mistaken permanence, and the followers of the Two Vehicles claim that such permanence is impermanent but then create the Eight Perversions (ed. mistaken views concerning permanence and impermanence, joy and suffering, self and no self, purity and impurity), through his penetrating teaching in the *Nirvana Sutra*, the Buddha refuted their biased views and clarified true permanence, true joy, true self, and true purity. You have been clinging to the words and turning your back on the meaning. By using the impermanence of annihilation and the permanence of certain death, you have mistaken the Buddha's perfect and profound final instructions. Even if you read them a thousand times, what good would they do you?'

Hsing-ch'ang suddenly felt awake and spoke this gatha:

'Because we hold on to an impermanent mind / the Buddha spoke of our permanent nature
those unaware of skillful means / gather pebbles in the springtime water
without my lifting a finger / my buddha nature appears before me
it wasn't bestowed on me by my teacher / nor did I obtain anything at all.'

The Master said, 'Now you have reached the bottom and are well named Chih-ch'e (ed. Determined to Reach the Bottom).' Chih-ch'e bowed and returned to his seat.'

National Teacher Huizhong (Disciple of the Sixth Ancestor) (MP Sutra, page 519)

(notes from "The Record of Linji", translated by Thomas Yuho Kirchner, page 229)

A Chan adherent from the south asked, "What about the mind of the old [buddhas]?"

The master said, "Walls and tiles, things without sentiency—all these are the mind of the old buddhas."

The southerner said, "This differs greatly from the words of the *Nirvana Sutra*, which says, '[Because it] has nothing to do with walls and tiles, things without sentiency, therefore we call it "buddha-nature".' Now you say that everything without sentiency is buddha-mind. I wonder if 'mind' and 'nature' are different or not."

The master said, "To the deluded they are different; to the enlightened they are not different."

"This again contradicts the sutra," said the southerner, "for it says, 'Mind is not buddha-nature because buddha-nature is permanent and mind is without permanence.' Now you say they are not different. What is the meaning of this?"

The master said, "[The *Nirvana Sutra* states,] 'You depend upon the words, not upon the meaning.' For example, in the winter freezing water becomes ice; in the spring melting ice becomes water. When sentient beings are deluded their nature is frost-bound and becomes mind; when sentient beings are enlightened, their mind melts and becomes nature.

If you are correct in insisting that what is without sentiency is without buddha-nature, then the sutra ought not to say, 'The three realms are mind-only, the ten thousand dharmas are consciousness-only.' Hence the *Avatamsaka Sutra* says, 'Every existent dharma in the three realms is only mind-created.' Now on the other hand, let me ask you, do things without sentiency exist inside the three realms or outside them? Are they mind or are they not mind? If they are not mind, the sutra ought not to say, 'The three realms are mind-only.' If they are mind, the sutra ought not to say, 'The nonsentient are without buddha-nature.' You yourself contradict the sutra; I do not contradict it."

Baizhang's Record, page 59 (translated by Thomas Cleary) (MP Sutra, page 132)

But all things, existent, nonexistent, ordinary, sacred, may be likened to gold ore; the self is like the veins of gold. When the gold and ore are separated, the real gold is exposed. If there is someone who is seeking money or treasure, you then turn the gold into money and give it to them. It's also like wheat flour, its substance pure, without any mineral salts; if someone wants cake, you turn the flour into cake and give it to them. It's also like a wise minister who skillfully interprets the meaning of the king—when the king is going to travel and asks for *saindhava*, then the minister brings a horse; at mealtime, when the king wants *saindhava* the minister serves salt. These all symbolize people who study the hidden essence, who are skillfully able to communicate and respond to situations faultlessly.

(note: in *Nirvana Sutra* *saindhava* is a metaphor for wise disciples understanding Buddha's meaning when he speaks of impermanence, discontent, not-self, and impurity as skillful means)

Dongshan's Song of the Jewel Mirror Samadhi (MP Sutra, page 281)

You are not it, in truth it is you: like a babe in the world in five aspects complete – it does not go, nor come, nor rise, nor stand, (nor speak); "baba wawa": is there anything said or not? Ultimately it does not apprehend anything because its speech is not yet correct.

Xuedou in Keizan's Denkoroku (translated by Francis Cook) (MP Sutra, page 60)

The forty-ninth patriarch was Zen Master Hsueh-tou Chih-chien. When Tsung-chueh was at [Mt.] Tient'ung, one day he entered the hall and said, "The World-honored One spoke with a hidden meaning, but it was not concealed to Kashyapa." When the master heard this, he was suddenly awakened to its profound meaning. Standing there in the ranks with the others, his tears fell. He unconsciously burst out, "Why haven't I heard this before?" Tsung-chueh finished his talk and summoned the master. He asked, "Why were you weeping?" The master replied, "The World-honored One spoke with a hidden meaning, but it was not concealed to Kashyapa." Tsung-chueh gave his approval, saying, "You must be the one that Yun-chu predicted."...

This situation occurs in the *Nirvana Sutra* (scroll five, in the chapter on "Tathagata Nature"). Once, Kashyapa Bodhisattva said to the Buddha, "O World-honored One, according to what the Buddha has said, all Buddhas, World-honored Ones, speak with a hidden meaning. But this is not what he means. Why? All Buddhas, World-honored Ones, have a hidden meaning, not a hidden body of teaching. It is like a magician's mechanical man. Even though people see it lean over, stretch, and look up and down, they do not realize that there is something inside it that makes it the way it is. The Buddha Dharma is not like that but instead allows people to understand completely. How could it be said that Buddhas, World-honored Ones, have a secret body of teachings?" The Buddha praised Kashyapa: "Very good, very good, good son. As you say, the Tathagata truly has no secret body of teachings. Why? Just as the full moon in autumn is clear and exposed in the sky, pure and unobscured, and seen by everybody, so are the Tathagata's words. He utters them clear and exposed, pure and unobscured. Deluded people say that it is a secret body of teachings, but the wise understand completely and do not call it a secret body of teaching." Since then, this expression has been used for a long time by followers of the patriarchal teachers. Therefore, when it was brought up here, Chih-chien was awakened. It was truly not concealed.

Dogen's Fukanzazengi (MP Sutra, page 457)

Please honored followers of Zen, long accustomed to groping for the elephant, do not be suspicious of the true dragon.

**Dogen's Shobogenzo Bussho: Buddha Nature (translated by Kazuaki Tanahashi)
(MP Sutra, page 366: Chapter on Bodhisattva Lion's Roar)**

Shakyamuni Buddha said, "Living beings all are buddha nature. The Tathagata is continuously abiding and not subject to change."

As this is the lion roar of our great teacher Shakyamuni turning the wheel of dharma, it is the top of the head and the eyeball of all buddhas and ancestors. It has been practiced for two thousand one hundred nineteen years (up to this day, the second year of the Ninji Era of Japan). It has been maintained by more than fifty generations of authentic heirs (up to Rujing, my late master, Priest Tiantong)—twenty-eight generations in India and twenty-three generations in China. Buddha ancestors of the ten directions have also maintained it. What is the meaning of the World-Honored One's teaching? It is the turning dharma wheel of "What has thus come?"

Living beings are also called "sentient beings," "various beings," or "various kinds." The *all are* is none other than sentient beings and living beings. Thus, all are buddha nature. One form of all beings is sentient beings. At this very moment, the inside and outside of sentient beings are the *all are* of buddha nature. This understanding is not only the skin, flesh, bones, and marrow of a person-to-person transmission, but "You have attained my skin, flesh, bones, and marrow."

(MP Sutra, page 390)

The Buddha said, "If you want to understand buddha nature, you should intimately observe cause and effect over time (or: temporal conditions). When the time is ripe, buddha nature manifests."

(MP Sutra, page 555)

Hearing the term "buddha nature," many students mistakenly regard it as the self explained by Shrenika, a teacher outside the way. They think this because they have not met a true person, the true self, a true teacher. They mistakenly regard the conscious mind, which is caused by the movement of air and fire, as the awareness and understanding of buddha nature.

(MP Sutra, page 517)

Baizhang said, "To say 'Entire living beings all have buddha nature' is to slander buddha, dharma, and sangha. To say 'Living beings have no buddha nature' is also to slander buddha, dharma, and sangha."

(MP Sutra, page 437)

Huangbo was sitting in the tea room while visiting Nanquan's monastery.

Nanquan asked, "What is the meaning of clearly seeing buddha nature by practicing samadhi and wisdom equally?"

Huangbo said, "It can be done by not depending upon a single thing for twelve hours."

Nanquan said, "Isn't that a view of another elder?"

Huangbo said, "Not really."

Nanquan said, "Putting aside for the moment the money for the gruel you have eaten, whom should I reimburse for the straw sandals?"

Huangbo stopped.

Dogen's Shobogenzo Osaku Sendaba: King Wants the Saindhava (trans. by Kazuaki Tanahashi) (MP Sutra, page 132)

Expressing with words and without words is like a wisteria vine entwined around a tree, herding a donkey and a horse, or penetrating water and cloud. Thus, the World-Honored One said in the *Maha Parinirvana Sutra*: "It is like a great king telling his courtiers to bring the saindhava. The word *saindhava* indicates any of four things: water, salt, cup, or horse. These four things are called by the same name."...

A monk asked Zhaozhou, "What about the moment the king wants the saindhava?"

Zhaozhou bent his body forward and held his hands together.

Xuedou later commented: "When the king wanted salt, the courtier brought the horse."...

The World-Honored One wanted the saindhava and Mahakashyapa smiled. Bodhidharma wanted the saindhava and his four disciples brought the horse, the salt, the water, and the cup. Study the key point that when the horse, the salt, the water, and the cup want the saindhava, the horse is brought and the water is brought.

Dogen's Shobogenzo Shime: Four Horses (trans. by Kazuaki Tanahashi) (MP Sutra, page 241)

According to the *Maha Parinirvana Sutra*, the Buddha said: "Good person, there are four ways to command a horse: touching the hair, touching the skin, touching the flesh, and touching the bones. The horse always follows the rider's command according to where it is touched. The Tathagata likewise subdues sentient beings in four ways. First, the Buddha speaks of birth for sentient beings, who accept his words just as the horse follows the rider's command by being touched on the hair. Second, the Buddha speaks of birth and old age for sentient beings, who accept his words just as the horse follows the rider's command by being touched on the hair and the skin. Third, the Buddha speaks of birth, old age, and sickness for sentient beings, who accept his words just as the horse follows the rider's command by being touched on the hair, skin, and flesh. Finally, the Buddha speaks of birth, old age, sickness, and death for sentient beings, who accept his words just as the horse follows the rider's command by being touched on the hair, skin, flesh, and bones. Good person, there is no fixed way for a rider to command the horse. The way the Tathagata, the World-Honored One, guides sentient beings is never in vain. Thus, the Buddha is called the Excellent Tamer."

This is called "the *Nirvana Sutra's* four types of horses." There are no students who do not study this teaching. There are no buddhas who do not speak of it.

Keizan's Denkoroku, chapter on Qingyuan (translated by Francis Cook) (MP Sutra, page 108)

Look carefully-this bright, empty realm is brighter than the rising sun. Even though this vast, marvelous, true nature is not an object of discrimination, it possesses complete, perfect, clear understanding. Though it is not bound by bones and marrow, it has a bright body that is not covered or hidden. This body cannot be discerned through motion or stillness, nor can its knowing be discerned through ordinary awareness and understanding. Since ordinary knowing is also this wisdom, motion and stillness are also nothing else [than this]. Even bodhisattvas who reach the tenth stage by stages still do not see Buddha nature really clearly. Why? The Buddha said, "Because they postulate an essence of things and establish practices [apart from ordinary activities], they do not see Buddha nature clearly. Because, for Buddhas, there are ultimately no practices and no realm of essence, they see Buddha nature thoroughly." In the eighth book of the Great Nirvana Scripture, in the chapter, "Awakening of the Tathagata Nature," it says, "Although innumerable bodhisattvas are endowed with all the perfections and practice the ten stages, they still are unable to see their own Buddha nature. The Buddha has consequently said that their views are deficient. Thus, good sons, the bodhisattva on the tenth stage still does not clearly know or see Buddha nature, so how much less are disciples or self-enlightened people able to see it?" With no reliance on seeing and hearing, and with no reliance on an external world or use of the thinking mind, just try to look beneath them. There will surely be an unexpected realization of an alert knowing not gotten from someone else.