

Rebecca Li  
Week One, *Living the Platform Sutra*  
October 5, 2015  
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Hello, welcome to *Living the Platform Sutra*. My name is Rebecca Li. I thought I would introduce myself a little bit before we get started. I started practicing with the founder of the Dharma Drum lineage, Master Sheng Yen, in the '90s when I was in graduate school. And then later on, when I moved to New Jersey, I started serving as his translator and then also started a teacher training program with Master Sheng Yen and a number of fellow friends from our dharma center. We started teaching in the early 2000s.

Nowadays I lead retreats at the Dharma Drum retreat center usually, and I also lead retreats in some of the other Dharma Drum lineage centers in North America. And I also help teach in some of the chapters. And this is a wonderful opportunity for me to visit the wonderful teachings of Master Hui-neng in the *Platform Sutra*.

The *Platform Sutra* is a very important sutra of the Chinese Ch'an tradition. And we will find that a lot of the teachings discussed in it resonate with what we have heard a lot about in the Ch'an tradition. What I'm going to talk about in the series of classes in this retreat is not going to be a sutra study. Meaning, I'm not going to go through the sutra line by line and explain those lines in the sutra. Rather what I have done is select a number of passages from the sutra that are useful and relevant for our practice of Ch'an.

So here's what we'll be doing is in these four segments over the next few weeks: I will start by talking about the essence of Ch'an as described by Master Hui-neng in the sutra; and then we will talk about sort of a number of obstacles that we encounter in the practice as discussed by Master Hui-neng in this sutra; and then we will talk about the importance of practice in daily life that Master Hui-neng talks about and how to go about doing it; and then the last week we will talk about the importance of cultivating right understanding, right view, so that we can cultivate wisdom in our practice of Ch'an. So this is how we will proceed in the next few weeks.

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So as we get started let me share an important passage—a couple lines from Master Hui-neng’s platform sutra. Now I’m using a rather old translation of this sutra so some of the language might sound funny, but stay with me. In the chapter on *prajna*, one of the two chapters that my master, Master Sheng Yen, used quite a lot in his intensive retreats from the sutra was this line from Master Hui-neng: “We should know that so far as buddhanature is concerned there is no difference between an enlightened man and an ignorant one. What makes the difference is that one realizes it, while the other is ignorant of it.” And this is the heart of the Ch’an tradition, the belief that everyone—everyone—has buddhanature right here, right now.

It is not something that we will go find somewhere outside of ourselves after trudging some long difficult path. It’s already here within each and every one of us. And the question is do we realize it or do we not? Can we find it? And most people upon hearing this will be like, “Huh? What? buddhanature within me? How can that be? There’s no way.” And that is the question. That is the question. Can you see it right now? And this idea is that it is already within us right now—right now, this moment, is a very important one to keep in mind. Why is it? Because it’s so easy for us to forget and try to look for it outside of ourselves. Look for everything. Maybe looking at books, look for it in a teacher, try to go to a different country, try to be a different person in order to look for our buddhanature. And here in this line Master Hui-neng told us, “No, it’s right here. Can you see it?”

You might ask, if you have read some of the Chinese Ch’an koans or discourses between teachers and these disciples, you might hear them. Teacher will say, “Right here in front of your nose. Can you see it? And the funny thing is we usually can’t—we can’t see it. We say, “Where? Where? Where? And that’s why we need to engage in the study and practice of the dharma.” And let me share another line with you: “For ordinary man is Buddha. And *klesa*,” vexations, “is *bodhi*. A foolish passing thought makes one an ordinary man, while an enlightened second thought makes one a Buddha. A passing thought that clings to sense objects is *klesa*, while a second thought that frees one from attachment is *bodhi*.” Yeah, this is an extraordinary set of



sentences. Again, it's challenging our deeply held belief that bodhi is somewhere outside of us far away. And we need to look outside of ourselves to get it.

Here Master Hui-neng said, "No. It's as a matter of this moment." In the last moment you might have given rise to thoughts or vexations, causing yourself suffering, attaching to these unhelpful thoughts, but this new moment, this emerging new moment, is all brand new and it's up to you. You don't have to give rise to that same thought. You don't need to keep reinforcing the same thought pattern that had been helpful for you. You can be a completely new person just by remembering to not go back to the same old habits. If you can do this in this moment then you are in accordance with Buddha. That's it.

So, again, it is another way to say the same thing that he said in the first passage: It's right here for you to see. It's your choice. It's your choice. Can we see it? Are we able to free ourselves from these unhelpful mind habits? Very often we call them attachments, become obsessed with these thoughts that just arise in our mind, and identify with them. Are we able to free ourselves from craving more of what we like? So think about it. We might all have this experience. Walking outside, beautiful day today, blue sky, breeze on our face, so lovely, so joyful. And then the thought arrives, "Oh, I wish it can be like this all the time." And there we go. We start planning, "How is it that I can make my life not so stressful? I can just feel this lovely breeze all the time." And there we go: We attach to these thoughts that arise. Craving for more of what we enjoy instead of spending this moment to enjoy what is here right now. Can we do that? Can you remember to do that? Can we be free from resisting or rejecting what is happening that we dislike? Maybe it's some soreness in our back, having sat in front of the computer for many hours. And that's what's happening. We resist that. We hate it. We want to get rid of it. And make it worse than it needs to be, when it's really just a physical sensation. Are we aware of how we create our own sufferings in our lives? Getting us farther and farther away from our buddhanature? Have you thought about that?

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We usually do not realize what we're doing in our mind. We usually have absolutely no idea how we are creating our own sufferings, by craving for more of what we want, by rejecting what we dislike, what is that? Well, usually, because our mind's too distracted—too distracted to even see clearly what's going on in our mind. You can stop for a moment to think about it: What if we sit here and try to allow the mind to be? We find it quite difficult. Anyone who will try to do a session of meditation can relate to that. Mind's all over the place, playing songs I heard, playing movie I saw last night, replaying an argument I had at work with a colleague, trying to rehearse how I should have responded to win the argument, maybe fantasizing about what is about to come after I heard a compliment from someone, and we extrapolate from it all the wonderful things that might play out in the future. That's what we're doing, constantly.

Except that we don't really know that we're doing that. The mind's simply too scattered to allow ourselves to see clearly what it's doing. And, of course, it makes it difficult to come in touch with our buddhanature. And so it is necessary for us to apply method of the practice so that we can relax our mind, relax our body, so that the mind can begin to settle down, slowly settling down by using a method to observe that the anchor of our mind so that the mind, instead of being all confused, so confused that it's not possible to see what is actually going on in it. Now not only we can't see the very obvious turbulence, dramas we're creating. Of course, we can't see. There are more subtle movements or the back-story that's causing us to feel a certain way about ourselves. How we always feel that we're not good enough—"Something's wrong with me"—a belief about ourselves that permeates our existence, that causes us to have this distorted view of what's going on. We can't see any of that. Because our mind is simply too scattered, too agitated.

So that's where the practice comes in, the practice of meditation comes in by applying a method first to settle down our mind. And the very subtle mind is not a goal in itself; in a way it's by settling our mind we then begin to see into our mind. Can you see the difference? Because some people they misunderstand the practice of Ch'an meditation as just having this calm mind and that it's a way to get a rest from our crazy life and then, after fifty minutes, the rest of the day is

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all stressed out again. How about try a different way? Think about it as a way to settle down our mind so that we have an opportunity to look into what is going on in our mind, to look at how we react to things that happen and how the way we react while resisting what's going on—denying, fighting against it, or craving, wanting more of something causes us to suffer.

Here we're talking about suffering that is, yes, the suffering, the first Noble Truth that the Buddha talked about. The word suffering very often may not resonate with a lot of people. And I like to use the word "unsatisfactoriness" as another word to translate this term *dukkha*. For many of us maybe we don't feel "I'm suffering." You're not in agony, per se. But we always have these nagging feelings that something's wrong, is not quite right. Things should be better. It should be different from what it is. And, yes, this is exactly what *dukkha* is about. Wanting things to be other than what is right now. Either wanting it to go away or wanting more regardless of it is that we want.

Sometimes you may not know what you want at all. You just feel that this is not right and it permeates our being. We feel something's wrong with ourselves. And this is a very painful way to live, because when we truly believe something is terribly wrong with ourselves it causes us to want to disown part of ourselves. And that can't be a very comfortable way to live. But please don't just believe me that this is happening. I would like you to go and take a look for yourself. Take a look to see if the way you react to things that happened in your life causes you suffering. Maybe you don't. Maybe none of this has anything to do with you. But we want to be sure that we're allowing ourselves to see into it, to look at what's going on in our mind because sometimes we might be quite afraid.

Remember if we believe something's wrong with ourselves we feel that the mind is doing something on its own. It's out of control. You might have to experience this yourself, that's your response to something where you act in a situation too fast. We say something that we regret terribly afterwards and we're like, "I didn't even mean to say that. What happened? Who said

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that? It came out of my mouth.” This is as if someone has taken over. And who has taken over? It is our habits, our habitual tendencies in the way we react to situations—habits that we are not even aware of because we have lived that way all our life.

It’s a lifetime of conditioning: wanting more of this, what is good when I like it. When I don’t like it I try to run away from it, try to chase it away, whatever habit that we have developed. And these habits are like air. We don’t even see it. We just play it out all day long—day after day. So the practice of meditation is an opportunity for us to settle down so that we don’t need to be engaged with other affairs in our life and see how these habits play out in our mind. And so I’d like to invite you to do a short meditation with me and try to see if it’s possible for you to observe how the mind reacts to things that arise in the mind. And how these habits cause you a lot of suffering from time to time. So the Buddha very often is seen as like some kind of a doctor. So rather than thinking of him as some kind of supernatural being, he’s like a doctor. And, basically, through his own experience he realized what has been ailing our mind and that’s what causes us our suffering.

The great news he brought to us was that we don’t have to suffer. Actually, our buddhanature is here. We don’t have to suffer. And if we choose the path of freeing ourselves from suffering we can get there with our choice. We don’t want to take that path if we do not believe we need this. So the doctor, the Buddha, has some medicine for us: the teachings and the practice. But it’s up to us to take the medicine. And we won’t think that we need it if we don’t think we suffer, if we do not see how we cause our own suffering.