

# THE ATTAINMENT OF

*Zen Master Wu Kwang*



In the Lotus Sutra, Shakyamuni Buddha makes two points:

12] First, that essentially, whatever practice someone is doing, there is ultimately only one vehicle, one goal, or one path; and, whatever route is chosen, that is the path to becoming Buddha. Whether one practices the Four Noble Truths, looks at cause and effect, or whatever, ultimately they all point toward the attainment of Buddhahood. All beings partake of this universal Buddha-nature, the Buddha said, and because everyone partakes of it, that is our true substance. Even our apparent moment-to-moment existence comes from that true substance. At any moment, then—at any instant—it is possible to perceive clearly the source of what our being is, and to wake up. And that is to become Buddha.

The second point is that, in the future, each of his major students and disciples would become Buddha.

He makes the first prophecy to Shariputra, who is considered his main disciple, saying, “In an age in the future”—which seems almost infinitely in the future, eons and eons and eons from now—you, Shariputra, shall become Buddha Such-and-Such, in such-and-such land, and etc., etc., etc. But the way he describes it makes it all seem, simultaneously, infinitely, remotely in the future, yet intimately close at hand: a paradox. Shariputra, of course, is happy to hear the prediction.

Then, the Buddha makes similar prophecies to his other main disciples: Mahakasyapa, Subhuti, and people who appear in other sutras. For each, he says that many eons from now, in such-and-such a place, you will become Buddha. And each prophecy carries that same feeling: it may happen in some infinitely distant, almost unimaginable future, and

yet it feels right here at hand, somehow, very, very close. After that, the Buddha makes a prophecy that all five hundred arhats who are in the assembly will also attain Buddhahood. He goes on and on and on and on, taking many chapters. All of it is written in ornate, sutra-style language with a cosmic quality.

Finally, he says, “My cousin Devadatta will also become Buddha.” Now, Devadatta had been a monk in the assembly. At first, he was a strong practitioner, very clear in many respects. But then he became jealous of Shakyamuni, the Buddha, and tried to kill him several times. That meant, in the orthodox view, that Devadatta was already in hell somewhere, because he had tried to kill the Buddha. Still, Buddha says, “At some time in the future, infinite eons from now, Devadatta, my cousin, will become Buddha, also.” The meaning is that everybody—from the best to the worst, from the most noble to the most wicked—will share in the same quality of awakened nature. Each and every one will realize that, recognize that, and express that.

At that point, a bodhisattva named Wisdom Accumulation Bodhisattva—who has come from another realm somewhere—thinks that the Buddha has finished, and says he will now return to his own realm. Buddha, however, urges him to stay, saying that Manjushri will appear in a moment and that the bodhisattva should talk with Manjushri about the Lotus Sutra.

Now, this bodhisattva’s name is interesting: Wisdom Accumulation Bodhisattva. That name is a contradiction in terms. From our standpoint, when you drop it all in the wastebasket, then wisdom appears; you do not accumulate anything.



There is a story that might illustrate that “do not accumulate” idea. It is about a university professor who came to call on a Zen Master in Japan. The Zen Master offered to serve the professor some tea. But, once the Zen Master began to pour tea into the little Japanese-style teacup, he just kept pouring. Soon, the tea was overflowing the cup, and spilling onto the floor. Finally, the professor exclaimed, “It’s overflowing! No more will fit in there!” And the Zen Master replied, “Yeah, just like your mind. I can’t fit anything more in there, either.”

That could also describe Wisdom Accumulation Bodhisattva.

Shortly after the Buddha urges this bodhisattva to wait, Manjushri suddenly appears out of the ocean. Now this is almost a sci-fi kind of vision: Manjushri is sitting on a lotus flower as the flower rises into the air, almost like a space ship, and comes to Vulture Peak, where the Buddha is giving his sermon. Once Manjushri lands, he gets off the lotus flower and bows to the Buddha, who directs him to Wisdom Accumulation Bodhisattva. Once they begin to talk, Wisdom Accumulation Bodhisattva asks Manjushri, the bodhisattva of primal wisdom, “Where have you been teaching lately?” Manjushri replies, “I’ve been teaching at the bottom of the ocean in the realm of the dragons.” Then, Wisdom Accumulation asks, “Do you have many students there?” Manjushri answers, “The number is uncountable, more than I can mention with my mouth. But I will show you.” Immediately, a multitude of bodhisattvas arise out of the ocean. All sit on similar flowers, which fly up in the air and come to Vulture Peak. As soon as they land, all the bodhisattvas bow to the Buddha.

Wisdom Accumulation Bodhisattva is very taken by this. He says to Manjushri, “What is it that you’ve been teaching at the bottom of the ocean?” Manjushri replies, “I only teach the Lotus of the Mystic Law Sutra.” Wisdom Accumulation Bodhisattva says, “Oh, that sutra is very, very subtle. Is there anyone there who is close to attaining Buddhahood?” Manjushri says, “Yes, the daughter of the dragon king, who is an eight-year-old girl. She is a very high-class student and attained enlightenment in an instant. She can become Buddha very quickly.”

Wisdom Accumulation is surprised by this. He says, “It’s hard to imagine that an eight-year-old girl could so quickly attain to Buddhahood. When I think of the many, many, many, many lives that Shakyamuni passed through on the bodhisattva path, making huge sacrifices and offering his life over and over again to finally attain unexcelled perfect enlightenment, it’s hard to imagine that this eight-year old dragon girl could so quickly attain it.” Just at that moment, she appears.

Of course, there is a lot here about birth and death, and about life after life after life that goes along with this. Even the earliest Buddhist teachings offer images of birth and death having to do with momentariness. From the most basic point of view, in Buddhist teaching, birth and death means the appearance and disappearance, momentarily, of all phenomena. Simultaneous with the appearance of all phenomena is the appearance of the consciousness that recognizes these appearances. All these things are momentary; they last only a moment. According to the Buddhist philosophical view, consciousness is no more permanent than anything else; it arises and passes away. The only constant thing is momen-



tariness, the flashing into existence of one thing after another. From that standpoint, birth and death are occurring nonstop: life after life after life are occurring nonstop. The past life is past moment. Present life is this moment. Future life is the next moment. That was the teaching of the Sixth Patriarch about reincarnation: past moment is past life; this moment is this life; next moment is future life. And if you perceive that clearly, then you perceive what birth and death are really about.


So, this young girl, the dragon king's daughter, appears. She immediately goes in front of the Buddha and offers him a pearl that is priceless. The Buddha readily accepts this gift, and the girl returns to her place. Just at that point, Shariputra feels the need to stick in his two cents, stating the orthodox view. He tells the little girl, "It's not possible for a woman to attain Buddhahood. Therefore, you are mistaken." At that time in India, there was a strong bias against women. The view was that women could only progress so far in their practice. They would have to be reborn as men to complete their training and attain enlightenment. But, of course, the teaching of this sutra is that all beings from the beginning share Buddha nature. So, there is a sense of equality being established here. The girl says to Shariputra and Wisdom Accumulation, "Did you see how quickly the Buddha received my offering of the priceless pearl?" And they agree, "Yes, very quickly." She says, "Even more quickly will I become Buddha. Just watch." Suddenly she transforms into a golden, radiant Buddha, and goes off to some realm far south of there. With their psychic vision they see her sitting and preaching the dharma to many beings.

Let us consider a few points here. First, why is the image of an eight-year-old girl used? That she is eight years old, of course, suggests that she is straight-forward and guileless, with a beginner's mind. She is not expert about anything, as compared with Wisdom Accumulation, who is somehow top-heavy.

Then, what is the meaning of her offering this pearl to the Buddha? As many commentators say, the meaning is that she offers her faith to the Buddha, and in that moment of offering her faith to the Buddha, she is awakened.

That leads to another question: What is the meaning of faith in the practice of Buddhism—and in the practice of Zen in particular? Sometimes "faith" in Buddhism means to have faith in the law of cause and effect. That means, if I do good things with faith that a good cause leads to a good result, then, over a long period of time, those actions will lead to attaining enlightenment. That is one view. Another suggests that because everything is transitory, changing, changing, changing, even if I am completely blocked, completely hindered, completely stupid, completely a rockhead, if I have faith in transitoriness, the process of change, then I will not be stuck, as I am now, in this current situation; I can evolve and can progress and can become awakened and enlightened. That is the general view of faith in Buddhism.

But that has to do with before and after, and time and progression. Faith from a Zen standpoint is a little bit different. Zen Master Ma Jo said, "Mind is Buddha, Buddha is mind." One point of faith in Zen is that this very mind that we all possess already—is Buddha, is already Buddha, and that Buddha is just this mind. That suggests that if we look into ourselves and into the essence of our minds, we find our true meaning, and our true nature; there is no need to look elsewhere for it. Also, because we already possess everything we need, we—just like this eight-year-old girl—can immediately awaken at any moment. Already, without cultivation, before we even sit down and assume this posture or chant the Heart Sutra or do anything like that, we are already complete; already we are one with all the Buddhas of the past, present, and future.

That is the primary point of faith in Zen. If you have that attitude, it influences the way you practice, because you are not trying to become something other than what you already are, you are not trying to get to some place other than where you already are, so you are not relating to yourself in time and space. If you relate to time and space, then you think, "I'm here and it will take X number of lifetimes to get over there to something called enlightenment." However, if already you are complete and that is your attitude toward your practice, then you are not trying to change anything, you are just trying to perceive what is already apparent. That is the basic point of Zen practice. We want to return again and again to that kind of beginner's mind, and cultivate that kind of faith in our practice. 

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