THE Zen school states that when the World-Honored One was about to enter nirvana, he took his seat, twirled a flower, and showed it to the assembly. Mahākāśyapa’s face broke into a smile. The Buddha said, “I have a subtle teaching concerning the eye and treasury of the correct teaching, the wonderful mind of nirvana, the true aspect that is without characteristics. It represents a separate transmission outside the sutras, independent of words or writing. I entrust it to Mahākāśyapa.”

Question: In what sutra does this passage occur?

The Zen school replies: The passage is from the Sutra of the Buddha Answering the Great Heavenly King Brahmā’s Questions.

Question: What Tripitaka master translated this sutra into Chinese? It is not listed in the Chen-yüan era catalog or K’ai-yüan era catalog of the sacred writings—why is this?

The Zen school replies: This sutra is a secret sutra. Therefore its words alone were transmitted from India to China.

Question: In the age of what sage or what Buddhist teacher was it transmitted to China? Why is there no record of the transmission? This sutra is not listed in the early records of the sacred scriptures, but only appears in the records of later times. If this sutra constitutes the source of the Zen school’s teachings, it ought to be listed in the earliest records of the scriptures. From this it is obvious that this is a spurious text.

The Zen school says: The second volume of the Nirvana Sutra states, “Now I take this unsurpassed correct teaching that I possess and entrust it all to Mahākāśyapa.” How do you interpret this passage?

Answer: Although the word “unsurpassed” would appear to refer to the Mahayana teachings, here it indicates the Hinayana teachings. In comparison to the erroneous doctrines of the non-Buddhists, the Hinayana teachings are called the correct teaching.

For example, the Great Teacher Miao-lo in his commentary, when explaining the phrase “the great teaching moved gradually eastward,” states, “The words ‘great teaching’ refer to the Buddhist teachings in general.” That is, the Mahayana, Hinayana, provisional, and true teachings are all included in the term “great teaching.” When the Hinayana teachings are compared to the non-Buddhist teachings, they are called the Mahayana, or great teaching. It is as though a person of lowly status were, in accordance with the circumstances, addressed as “Master,” or spoken of as a person of exalted status.
Volume three of the Nirvana Sutra states: "If the treasure of the Law were entrusted to Ananda and the other monk-disciples, it would not be able to endure for long. Why? Because all the voice-hearers and men such as Mahākāśyapa are subject to the process of change. They are like that old man who is entrusted with another person's possessions [but is unable to fulfill his duty]."

"Hence the unsurpassed Buddhist teaching should be entrusted to the bodhisattvas. The bodhisattvas are skilled at questions and answers, and for that reason the treasure of the Law will be able to endure for long. Over countless thousands of ages it will thrive and grow ever more brilliant, bringing benefit and peace to living beings. They are like the person who, being in the prime of life, is fit to be entrusted with another person's possessions. That is the reason it is bestowed upon the great bodhisattvas—simply because they are skilled at questioning."

From this it is clear that the Mahayana teachings and the Hinayana teachings were entrusted to different persons.

Volume ten of the same sutra states: "Now, Manjushrī, all of you must broadly expound the great teaching for the sake of the four kinds of believers. So now I entrust this sutra teaching to you, Manjushrī. And if Mahākāśyapa, Ananda, and the others come, then in the same way I will also entrust the correct teaching to them."

From this we know that Manjushrī and Mahākāśyapa were entrusted with a great teaching. But the teaching the Buddha entrusted to the latter was the Hinayana teaching.

The Treatise on Enlightenment to One's Nature says, "A person who understands the mind can gain the way of enlightenment. Therefore such a person is called a Buddha."

But there are five kinds of enlightenment. What kind of enlightenment is meant here? And there are various ways of "gaining the way." What kind of "way" is referred to here? What is made clear in the sutras [other than the Lotus Sutra] is not the great enlightenment or the unsurpassed way. The Buddha says, "In these more than forty years, I have not yet revealed the truth." Question: In the Lotus Sutra, eminent and humble persons, men and women—what sort of "way of enlightenment" do they gain?

Answer: [The Lotus Sutra says], "As soon as they have heard one verse they will all without doubt be certain of attaining Buddhahood. And again it says, "Honesty discarding expedient means, I will preach only the unsurpassed way." From this we know that what is gained is unsurpassed enlightenment.

[The sutra further states]: "If one listens to them [the preachers of the Law] for even a moment, one will immediately attain supreme perfect enlightenment." This enlightenment, then, is a benefit gained by one who listens to this Lotus Sutra teaching for even a moment.

Question: You speak of a "moment." It is said that thirty moments make up one day and one night. When you say, "One listens to them for even a moment," is this the kind of "moment" you mean?

Answer: Yes. Volume two of T'ien-t'ai’s Great Concentration and Insight says, "Do not neglect it even for a moment." And The Annotations on Great Concentration and Insight states, "It is not permissible to neglect it even for a short time. Therefore the text speaks of 'a moment.'" Hence we know that "a moment" means a very brief space of time.

Question: The field of the original nature is what we in the Zen school take as the model on which to base our
Zen meditation. [What is your opinion on this?]

Answer: What do you mean by “the field of the original nature”? In what sutra does this term appear?

The Lotus Sutra is the true field of blessings for human and heavenly beings, which means that it is the teaching used to instruct and convert human and heavenly beings. Hence the Buddha is called the “teacher of heaven and human beings.”

Persons who put faith in this sutra are able not only to see the Buddha innate in their own being, but to see all the Buddhas of the three existences of past, present, and future. It is as though one were looking into the pure crystal mirror of King Yama, in which all forms and shapes are seen. Thus the sutra says, “And it will be like a pure bright mirror in which forms and shapes are all reflected.”

The Zen school teaches that “the mind itself is the Buddha, and the body is none other than the Buddha.” [What is your opinion on this?]

Answer: A sutra states: “The mind is the utmost enemy, and this enemy works the greatest evil. This enemy can bind persons and send them to the place of King Yama. When you are burning alone in the fires of hell because of the retribution for your evil deeds, you cannot hope to save the wife and children you cherished, your brothers, or your kin.” And the Nirvana Sutra says, “May I be the master of my mind and not let my mind become my master!”

Deluded and shameless as the mind is, to declare that “the mind itself is the Buddha” is to be a person who supposes he has attained what he has not attained, who supposes he has understood what he has not understood, is it not?

Question: What is the view of the Lotus school?

Answer: The Lotus Sutra states, “If you are endowed with the thirty-two features, then this will be true extinction.” And it says that [living beings] “quickly acquire the body of a Buddha.”

But the Zen school, revering the Buddha, which is the essential nature of phenomena, supposes that the self and [Shakyamuni] Buddha are equal, which is to fall into the error of over-bearing arrogance. Surely a person who does so will be condemned to the Avīci hell. Hence the Lotus Sutra says, “The monks who are overbearing arrogant will fall into a great pit.”

The Zen school says, “Go trampling on Vairochana’s head.” But who is this Vairochana?

Do they mean the Dharma body that exists everywhere throughout the entire realm of phenomena? If so, then the mountains and rivers, the great earth itself, are all the body ground of Vairochana. This is Vairochana as the essential nature of phenomena. This body ground is trampled on by dogs and foxes and such like—it is surely not the property of the Zen school alone.

Or do they mean actually trampling on the head of the Buddha [Shakyamuni]? But even the god Brahmā cannot see the top of the Buddha’s head, so how could it be possible for ordinary mortals of an inferior level to trample on it?

In his relation to all living beings, the Buddha manifests the three virtues of sovereign, teacher, and parent. To trample on the head of a loving father whose kindness and virtue are so vast is to behave as an extremely stupid and wicked person, one perversely sinful and void of filial respect.

Even the sacred texts of Confucius condemn such behavior, to say nothing of the correct teaching of the Thus Come One! Could there be anyone so foolish as to praise such wrong behavior, such an erroneous teaching, and
thereby incur immeasurably weighty blame?

When the Buddha was in the world, we are told that Mahākāśyapa "bowed his head in respectful obeisance." But now that he has passed into nirvana, these benighted Zen believers say they will trample on the Buddha's head — what fearful words!

The Zen school says it is a separate transmission outside the sutras, independent of words or writing. [What is your opinion on this?]

Answer: Generally speaking, there are three types of teachings that are propagated in the world. First is the Confucian teaching, which is of twenty-seven varieties. Second is the Taoist teaching, which comprises twenty-five schools. Third are the twelve divisions of the Buddhist scriptures, or what the T'ien-t'ai school defines as the four teachings and the eight teachings. Does the Zen school claim that it is something outside these teachings?

It is customary among physicians to name anyone who departs from the basic practices of medicine a "practitioner of outside ways." In human society one speaks of those relatives who are of a surname other than one's own as "outside relatives." And in Buddhism, that which departs from the sutras and treatises is known as an "outside way."

The Nirvana Sutra states, "If there is any person who does not abide by the expositions of the Buddha, you should understand that this person is a servant of the devil." And volume nine of On "Great Concentration and Insight" says, "Before the Lotus Sutra, they were disciples of an outside [non-Buddhist] way."

The Zen school describes itself as something "not transmitted by the Buddha and patriarchs." [What is your opinion on this?]

Answer: If that is so, then why does the Zen school talk about the "twenty-eight patriarchs of India" and the "six patriarchs of China"? If you speak in this way, you are fueting your own assertion that the teachings were entrusted to Mahākāśyapa, are you not? How do you explain this contradiction in your own words?

The Zen school says, "This superior way of ours has not been transmitted by the sages of the past."

Answer: If that is so, then the Zen school of today can have no real understanding of this "superior way" either. And if it has no real understanding of it, then it is not true Zen!

All the Zen school does is sing about a "superior way," resting in arrogance, never correcting its deluded views but instead boasting of "perceiving one's true nature." Its greatest mistake is to create gaps between people's capacities and the Buddha's teachings. In doing so, it impedes the enlightening process of the Buddha's teachings and falls ever deeper into error.

The Zen followers talk about a doctrine "outside the sutras" and practice this thing "outside the sutras"; they say their doctrine is "independent of words or writing," yet they love to take up their brushes and write about it. Their words and their hearts fail to match — how could they be other than followers of the heavenly devil, disciples of a non-Buddhist way?

It is through the use of words and letters that the Buddha saves living beings.

Question: What proof have you of this?

Answer: Volume fifteen of the Nirvana Sutra states, "My wish is that all living beings will accept and uphold the words and letters of the Buddhist teachings." And the Sutra on Resolving Doubts about the Middle Day of the Law says, "It is through the use of words and letters that living beings are saved and can attain enlightenment."

If one rejects the use of words and
letters, then how can the Buddha’s work be done?

Does the Zen school claim that it uses no words in teaching people? If that is what it claims, then how does it account for the fact that Bodhidharma from southern India wrote a commentary in five volumes on the four-volume Lankāvatāra Sūtra? When he transmitted it to his disciple Hui-k’o, he said, “Observing the land of China, I see that this sutra alone is suitable for saving people. Therefore you must use this for saving the world.”

If this account is true, then how can you persist in your unreasonable assertion that yours is a “separate transmission outside the sutras”?

Next, with regard to the claim that Zen is something “not transmitted by the Buddha and patriarchs,” [did not Bodhidharma] say, “Hot or cold—just experience them for yourself!” Is this not an injunction in words? And after this injunction has been passed from teacher to disciple, the latter can then understand “hot and cold” for himself.

This is what the Lotus Sutra means when it says, “Thrust aside evil friends and associate with good companions.”21 Great Concentration and Insight states: “If one does not meet up with a teacher, one’s perverse wisdom will grow day by day, one’s immersion in the sufferings of birth and death will become deeper with each month. Like a person dragging a curved log through a dense forest, when can one ever hope to escape?”

Even when encountering the problems of everyday life, one must consult with others, and how much more is this true when attempting to understand the profound principles of Buddhism. How can one hope to grasp them easily by oneself? As the [Nirvana] sutra says, “Close, but you cannot see it, like your eyelashes; far off, but you cannot see it, like the trail of a bird’s flight in the sky.”

Leaving aside the seated Zen meditation of persons of superior faculties and superior capacity, the Zen school followers of the present time sit facing the wall as though they had an earthenware jar over their heads. As the [Lotus] sutra says, “Their vision [is] so impaired they can see nothing. They do not seek the Buddha, with his great might, or the Law that can end their suffering, but enter deeply into erroneous views, hoping to shed suffering through greater suffering.”22

On “Great Concentration and Insight” states: “They do not even comprehend the clear words of everyday life, much less the profound principles of the Middle Way. How can they possibly comprehend the mystic teachings, which are perfect and eternally abiding?”

The Zen believers of the present age are all holders of greatly erroneous views. In particular, they rely on the recorded sayings of common mortals who have not yet freed themselves from the three categories of illusion, and scorn the words and teachings of the Thus Come One, the possessor of the four kinds of wisdom, perfect in understanding. Could there be any greater folly? For the sickness they have no medicine to offer, to fit the capacities of living beings they have no teachings. Even bodhisattvas at the stage of near-perfect enlightenment still relied upon the Buddha’s teachings—why do these ignorant people who are on the lowest level of practice not put their faith in the sutras?

Thus it happened that, when the Zen school rose to prominence in China, that country rapidly fell into decline. And now, as an omen of the impending downfall of our own nation, we see these Zen teachers with their benighted understanding everywhere about us. Great Concentration and Insight says, “This is an ominous specter of the destruction of the Law, this
is an ominous specter of the age."

The Zen school says: The Lotus school seems to refute our claim to a teaching "independent of words or writing." But then why does the Buddha say, "I never preached a single word"?

Answer: I assume you are quoting from the passage in the Lankāvatāra Sutra. But apparently you do not understand the two terms, the original and abiding Law, and the Law that the Buddha realized for himself. If you are not familiar with these two principles, you should study them. Moreover, the sutra you refer to has already been invalidated by the words of the Buddha: "In these more than forty years, I have not yet revealed the truth." Why use a sutra such as that for your standard?

Question: The Sutra on Resolving Doubts about the Middle Day of the Law states, "I have never seen the Thus Come One preach one phrase of the Law." How do you account for this?

Answer: These are the words of Bodhisattva Constant Donations. The Lotus Sutra states, "When the bodhisattvas hear this Law, they will be released from all entanglements of doubt. The twelve hundred arhats, they too will all attain Buddhahood." Thus we know that the eighty thousand bodhisattvas and the twelve hundred arhats all sat in the assembly and listened to the Law with joy. But Constant Donations alone is not found among the group, so which assertion should we rely on? The name Constant Donations is not listed among those of the leaders of the bodhisattvas who sat in the assembly when the Lotus Sutra was preached, so it is perfectly natural that he should have spoken as he did.

What is more, the Sutra on Resolving Doubts about the Middle Day of the Law goes on to state: "But, seeing how living beings come into the world and then pass away, he preached the Law in order to save people." Why cling only to the statement that the Buddha did not "preach one phrase of the Law" and overlook the fact that in actuality he preached a wonderful truth?

Every one of the principles you have described represents an erroneous view of the grossest kind. You should abandon these mistaken beliefs and instead put your faith in the Lotus Sutra. If you fail to do so, it means you lack any true aspiration for enlightenment, does it not?

Background

Nichiren Daishonin wrote this letter in 1255, some two years after he had first publicly set forth his teaching. In his teaching, the Daishonin asserted that the Lotus Sutra represents the core of the lifetime teachings of Shakyamuni Buddha. At the same time, he clarified that the essence of the Lotus Sutra is Nam-myoho-renge-kyo, the teaching that best accords with the capacities of people of the Latter Day of the Law and that enables them to attain Buddhahood.

In addition, the Daishonin refuted the doctrines of the well-known religious schools of his day, such as the Nembutsu (or Pure Land), Zen, True Word, and Precepts schools, which used sutras other than the Lotus as their basis.

In this letter, he addresses the Zen school exclusively, criticizing its core assertions. He determines that Zen, which describes its doctrines as a "separate transmission outside the sutras" and "independent of words or writ-
ing,” is actually a teaching outside Buddhism, which has been passed down through words and writing in the form of sutras.

At the time, Zen had spread broadly among the samurai class, and key individuals within the Kamakura shogunate liberally sponsored the construction of Zen temples, inviting ranking Zen priests from Kyoto and China to preside over them.

This letter is addressed to Renjō, about whom little is known.

Notes

1. “Its words alone were transmitted” is thought to mean that while the general meaning of the sutra was orally transmitted, the sutra itself was not.
2. Chang-an’s preface to T’ien-t’ai’s Profound Meaning of the Lotus Sutra.
4. The “old man” in this paragraph and the “person . . . in the prime of life” in the following paragraph refer to a story told in the Nirvana Sutra. A rich man, obliged to journey to another region, entrusts an old man with a large sum of money to keep for him until his return. But the old man dies, and since he has no heir, the money is lost. The sutra points out that if the money had been entrusted to a young man “in the prime of life,” with parents, a wife and children, retainers, and kin to look after his affairs should he die, then the rich man would have been able to receive his money.
5. A treatise attributed to Bodhidharma, the founder of the Zen school.
6. Five kinds of enlightenment is a reference to the five stages in the attainment of enlightenment described in The Treatise on the Great Perfection of Wisdom. They are (1) to arouse the aspiration for enlightenment, (2) to subdue earthly desires and carry out pārāmitā practices, (3) to perceive the true nature of phenomena and attain purity of mind, (4) to become free from earthly desires and attain complete knowledge, and (5) to attain unsurpassed enlightenment.
7. Immeasurable Meanings Sutra.
8. Lotus Sutra, chap. 2.
9. Ibid.
10. Ibid., chap. 10.
11. “Moment” here refers to the Japanese word shuyu, which means a brief space of time. Here shuyu is regarded as an equivalent of the Sanskrit word mūhūrtā, which means a thirtieth of one complete day, or twenty-four hours.
12. One of a Buddha’s ten honorable titles.
15. This statement is based on the words from the “ Expedient Means” chapter of the Lotus Sutra, “What they had not attained they supposed they had attained, what they had not understood they supposed they had understood.”
16. Lotus Sutra, chap. 7.
17. Ibid., chap. 16.
18. Ibid., chap. 2.
19. These words are found in The Blue Cliff Records, a collection of koans compiled by Yuan-wu in the early twelfth century. Koan refers to a Zen master’s statement, including questions and answers directed at his disciples. Koans are used as objects of meditation for developing insight.
20. Lotus Sutra, chap. 4.
21. Ibid., chap. 3.
22. Ibid., chap. 2.
23. Because there is no distinction between these two Laws, the Lankāvatāra Sutra says, the Buddha never preached a single word other than the original and abiding Law. However, because the sutra does not explain the Law the Buddha realized, the Daisho-in says it is a teaching in which the Buddha has “not yet revealed the truth.”
24. A bodhisattva to whom the Sutra on Resolving Doubts about the Middle Day of the Law is addressed.
25. Lotus Sutra, chap. 2.