

Wumenguan Case 9 Xingyang's Nonattained Buddha

By Peter Bursky, originally given as a talk at SZC on May 19, 2018

The case:

*A monk asked the priest Xingyang of Qingrang,
"The Buddha of Supremely Pervading, Surpassing Wisdom did zazen on the
Bodhi Seat for ten kalpas, but the Dharma of the Buddha did not manifest itself
and he could not attain Buddhahood.
Why was this?"
Xingyang said, "Your question is exactly to the point."
The monk said, "But he did zazen on the Bodhi Seat; why couldn't he attain
Buddhahood?"
Xingyang said, "Because he is a nonattained Buddha."*

Wumen's Comment:

*I approve the Old Barbarian's realization,
but I don't approve his understanding.
If an ordinary person understands, he or she is thus a sage.
If a sage understands, he or she is thus an ordinary person.¹*

Today's case features the little known Master Xingyang of Qingrang mountain, a 10th century Chinese zen master said to be the last known heir in the Guiyang school of zen. The encounter is the only existing dialogue we have with Xingyang, but it gives a pretty clear indication as to what his teaching style might have been like. In this case he seems cool, settled and quite effortless, maybe someone not too worried about passing on the torch. He was a student of Master Bajiao, who we meet later in case 44 of this collection. It is said the Guiyang line ended with Xingyang, and the house was soon after absorbed into the Linji school. However, this is a later take on the history of the early days of Zen in China, and today's case offers a challenge to such ways of seeing things.

As for the content of this case, it might be wise for me to give a quick summary of the context from which the monk's question is derived and how the original story has been flipped on its head by Master Xingyang, so that he may offer some assistance to the monk, and all of us, in this dialogue.

"The Buddha of Supremely Pervading, Surpassing Wisdom did zazen on the Bodhi Seat for ten kalpas, but the Dharma of the Buddha did not manifest itself

¹ Robert Aitken, *The Gateless Barrier* (Cali. North Point Press, 1991), p. 64

and he could not attain Buddhahood.

The monk here is quoting almost directly from chapter seven of the Lotus sutra, sometimes called “The Parable of the Magic City”, which is one of those highly lavish tales full of all the bells and whistles one might expect from a vibrant and colourful Mahayana text.

The story begins with Shakyamuni Buddha giving a long-winded explanation of how the time in which the Buddha of Supremely Pervading, Surpassing Wisdom lived goes so far back that it is almost inconceivable to imagine how long ago that actually is. For those, like myself, without the patience to appreciate the Buddha’s long and detailed description, he also offers it in verse form:

"When I think of it, in the past, immeasurable, boundless kalpas ago, there was a Buddha, most honored of two-legged beings, named Supremely Pervading, Surpassing Wisdom. If a person should use his strength to smash the ground of the thousand-million-fold world, should completely crush its earth particles and reduce them all to powdered ink, and if when he passed through a thousand lands he should drop one speck of ink, and if he continued in this manner until he had exhausted all the specks of ink, and if one then took the soil of the lands he had passed through, both those he dropped a speck in and those he did not, and once more ground their earth into dust, and then took one grain of dust to represent one kalpa—the number of tiny grains of dust would be less than the number of kalpas in the past when that Buddha lived. Since that Buddha passed into extinction, an immeasurable number of kalpas such as this have passed. ²

The Buddha then offers a capping phrase to his description of this inconceivable distance of ancient time, saying, “And yet, I remember it as if it were right now”.

And so with Shakyamuni having set up, or at least hinting at a relationship between the incalculable past and the present moment, he then moves into a description of Buddha Supremely Pervading, Surpassing Wisdom’s long and arduous practice and how he did indeed attain nothing at all, even after ten kalpas of practice.

That seems to be maybe where the monk in our case stopped reading, and putting his own copy of the sutra down, thought to himself, “Shit, this is going to take a very, very long time”. It is here the original story and our case part ways. It seems the gods had had enough of waiting around and decided to step in, and they created a lion throne that allowed the Buddha of Supremely Pervading, Surpassing wisdom to soon after attain complete and perfect enlightenment. Perhaps, like us most of the time, all he needed was a little help from the sangha.

And so, although flowers rained down from the heavens, and a fragrant wind from time to time swept away the withered flowers as fresh ones rained down, the Buddha of Supremely Pervading, Surpassing Wisdom simply continued to practice for another ten kalpas,

² Burton Watson, *The Lotus Sutra* (NY. Columbia Univ. Press 1993), p. 118-119

unperturbed. Time is not the issue it seems, but to be at ease in the flow of time is to be one with cause and effect.

“The Buddha of Supremely Pervading, Surpassing Wisdom did zazen on the Bodhi Seat for ten kalpas”...

So far, so good. We might say this guy really went for it!

A predominant belief in our culture is that life shouldn't be easy, and we should struggle hard to get what we want. If it wasn't hard, you didn't earn it and you can not appreciate it. That might seem somewhat true if we think we've achieved something great when we have a breakthrough in our practice, but in my experience insights almost never come from grinding your teeth and holding tightly onto something, you open up to them when you let go and realise what you've struggled after is not something to be attained. The practice is one of continually letting go, and each stage along the way is a hint, to let go, let go. Eventually we develop faith in that process because it works.

Most of us can agree that If we define ourselves by our achievements and look for security in conquering a world that continually seems to move further and further out of reach, at some point we will probably end up tired and unhappy.

The Buddha nailed that when he set forth the second noble truth—That you set up the cause for suffering when you hold onto the belief that there's something better than the way things are right now, something better to attain. Once we desire to attain something we set up a future event, and therefore a present, and a past. Set that in motion and ten kalpas is a very long time. Buddhahood is an aeon away.

In fact, everything we do may seem like ten kalpas away if we are never really settled.

Although the time may come for renunciation, and as mentioned before letting go is a BIG part of our practice here, nonattainment can not be forced, it is simply becoming intimate with the way things truly are. With faith in times passing, knowing deeply that everything comes and goes, we develop a deeper sense of gratitude for this precious human life.

With that in mind, how does *“The Dharma of the Buddha did not manifest itself and he could not attain Buddhahood”* make us feel?

And *“Why?”* asks the monk, was there no manifestation or attainment of the Buddha Dharma? Even after ten kalpas.

Judging by the monk's response, it seems the 10th century wasn't that much different from the Buddha's time, nor our own, in terms of our fundamental human problem of wanting a better situation.

Caught by old man time, the monk is obviously quite disturbed by the fact that ten kalpas of zazen couldn't get a Buddha anywhere. Hakuin Zenji was similarly stuck when as a young monk he heard the tale of Master Yantou's death at the hand of bandits...

“It was a very disheartening discovery” He recalls. *“After all, Yantou was said to be the kind of person who comes along only once in 500 years: he was truly one of the dragons of his age. If it were possible for such a man to be assaulted and killed by common bandits while he was still alive, how could an ordinary garden-variety monk like me hope to avoid falling into the three evil*

paths after I died? A buddhist monk, I concluded, had to be the most useless creature on earth”
3

We will soon find out however that there's nothing at all out of the ordinary with a statement such as *“The Dharma of the Buddha did not manifest itself and he could not attain Buddhahood”* It's just that we've just never really been brought up to think or see in any other way. What if we did just leave it at *“The Dharma of the Buddha does not manifest itself and you can not attain Buddhahood”*?

Who would you be then? What would your practice be like? In light of this statement, what's your own practice got to show for itself?

Once a monk named Huichao (whose name means 'surpassing wisdom') asked Fayán, “What is Buddha?”. Fayán said, You are Huichao.

And at another time a monk again asked Fayán, “What is the style of the ancient Buddhas?”, Fayán said, “Where can it not be completely seen?”⁴

You are you, where can you not find your true self? Take this onto your own Bodhi seat and feel that freedom right there.

Xingyang said, “Your question is exactly to the point.”

Let's rephrase the monk's question again, this time as a statement...

“The Buddha of Supremely Pervading, Surpassing Wisdom did zazen on the Bodhi Seat for ten kalpas, but the Dharma of the Buddha did not manifest itself and he could not attain Buddhahood.”

Yes!, yes!, of course, most definitely!

Sitting with 'supremely pervading' or 'surpassing wisdom' in your practice, you may eventually find that nothing else is needed beyond what you already have, or are for that matter, even that much desired Buddhahood may not be needed anymore.

With a masterful casualness characteristic of the Guiyang school of Zen to which Xingyang represents, the master simply replies with “Your question is exactly to the point”. By this stage you may have picked up on what Xingyang is getting at here, but the integration of that fundamental truth so it becomes as easy as “Your question is exactly to the point” may or may not take a kalpa or two. No rush though! Attaining it is not really the point. The Japanese Zen Master Bankei, whose Unborn teaching resonates quite deeply with today's theme once said, “You are Buddhas to begin with. There's no way for you to become Buddhas now for the first time”.⁵ Even though when “Mu” breaks open it might seem like the first time, the real shift occurs when you realise “Mu” itself has been active a lot longer than that.

The question was exactly to the point because just doing zazen is the point entirely.

Supremely Pervading Buddhas, Surpassing Wisdom Buddhas, a jewel encrusted bodhi seat and the immeasurable past ten kalpas are all just helpful pointers that skillfully make use of language to open you up to a broader more inclusive way of seeing things.

³ Norman Waddell, *Wild Ivy* (Boston. Shambala Pub. 1999), p. 18

⁴ Andy Ferguson, *Zen's Chinese Heritage* (Massachusetts. Wisdom Pub. 2011), p. 344

⁵ Norman Waddell, *The Unborn* (New York. North Point Press. 2000), p. 138

Xingyang is saying “Where you are sitting is Supremely Pervading, you already have The Surpassing Wisdom right where you are”. If that’s the case then, how do you present it?. The question is exactly to the point.

The monk said, “But he did zazen on the Bodhi Seat; why couldn’t he attain Buddhahood?”

Sorry mate, but the zafu won’t scratch your back no matter how much you sit on it.

When Dogen was young he often wondered what the point of practice was if everyone was intrinsically already enlightened. Eventually he came to realise that practice and realisation are not separate, and that practice *is* realisation. All Buddhas are practising Buddhas, and the dharma can never be attained in the sense that it is something outside of yourself. As far as Dogen is concerned, when you sit silently on your cushion, nothing more is needed.

The Korean Master Seung Sahn commented on this case saying, “The Huayan Sutra states, “Each mote particle has Buddha-nature, so everything has already become Buddha.” If someone wants to become Buddha, this is already a big mistake. So, be careful”⁶

Referring to the grand story-line of the Lotus sutra that this case quotes from, Nyogen Senzaki says in his commentary on this case that the monk “could not enjoy the beauty of the drama”.⁷

The state of the monk’s process with this question is very reflective of what we all struggle with in our lives, not just in practice, but in the world as well. Although we endeavor to embody practice and realisation in our everyday lives, we are still not immune to the seemingly maddening culture of attainment and we encounter it constantly in our relationships with others. When we begin to let our zazen penetrate deeper into our lives, moments of anger, sadness and pain may make us question our practice. “This shouldn’t be happening, I’ve been meditating for 20 years now!” or “Learn how to drive ya fuckin idiot!” - “Shit what a horrible thing to say, where’s my patience!?! Surely I’m better than that”.

Attainment rears its head everywhere. It can create any number of obstacles for us, especially if we’re not clear on what’s actually being presented by the reality of seeing things as they are. Recognising the life current of gain and loss however is our practice. It is our practice and realisation.

The monk said, “But he did zazen on the Bodhi Seat; why couldn’t he attain Buddhahood?” Xingyang said, “Because he is a nonattained Buddha.”

The Vietnamese master, Thich Thanh Tu says, “Once we create something to attain, then that something is not inherent within us”.⁸

If you truly want to ask yourself whether or not you can attain Buddhahood or not, you really do have to go beyond this idea of Buddha that you’ve created for yourself. The Buddha that Xingyang is talking about is very different from anything we might conjure with our imagination. We practice to realise a whole other way altogether. Yet we need to be able to present it here

⁶ Paul Lynch, *Wumenguan* (Cali. Before Thought Pub. 2010), p. 29

⁷ Nyogen Senzaki, *Eloquent Silence* (Massachusetts. Wisdom Pub. 2008), p. 70

⁸ Thich Thanh Tu, *Heart Sutra Lecture* (Cali. Thien Vien Dieu Nhan 200?), p. 110

and now, as absolutely our everyday lives. Denying something to attain something else will not do, the whole storyline must be dropped. It's quite easy to say that, but to actualise it when we go and sit on our cushions is something else all together. In a way It's quite profound really, just to sit still and be as you are.

There is one part of the Heart Sutra I really like, and it occurs right when you think Guanyin is going to give you something to latch onto, that something being some sort of conception of emptiness, or something else other than. After expounding the nature of emptiness to Shariputra, denying the inherent existence of anything at all, Guanyin ends the foregoing "In emptiness there is no this, no that" part of the sutra with "no knowledge, no attainment". Some versions of the text also have "no non-attainment" so that the stickiness of "non-attainment" doesn't become a problem for us.

The text continues, "Therefore, Shariputra, without attainment, bodhisattvas take refuge in Prajnaparamita and live without walls of the mind. Without walls of the mind and thus without fears, they see through delusions and finally nirvana"⁹

Put simply, if there is no origin of suffering, how can there be a way out of it, some sort of special attainment we can acquire. But it's not that suffering just disappears. As it says earlier in the sutra, emptiness is not in any way separate from form. There are suffering Buddhas too, just as there are non attained Buddhas, and when it goes all the way through, suffering is also the Great Way. Guanyin still hears the cries of the world.

So what is a non attained Buddha? Definitely not someone who tries to get rid of everything, there's still the stickiness of "Non-attaining" there.

Someone once asked Xingyang's great great dharma grandfather Yangshan, "May I hear the principle of attaining mind?"

Yangshan said, "If you want to attain mind, then there's no mind that can be attained. It is this unattainable mind that is known as truth". That unattainable mind is very much what Xingyang is talking about.

When I am aware of myself sitting here right now, that awareness is 'non-attained buddha'.

Also, the non-separation between that awareness and the entire phenomenal world is 'non-attained Buddha'. We need not be concerned with whether the Buddha way has manifested or not because that concern simply doesn't arise as a concern that can bother that truth, it's just something else that comes and goes, another aspect of our essential nature, free to be itself.

Not attaining is just being like this. The Buddha dharma is clearly manifested.

Wu-men's comment:

I approve the Old Barbarian's realization,

but I don't approve his understanding.

If an ordinary person realizes, he or she is thus a sage.

If a sage understands, he or she is thus an ordinary person.

⁹ Red Pine, *The Heart Sutra* (Cali. Counterpoint Press. 2004) p. 3

“I approve the old barbarians realization, but I don’t approve his understanding”

When you take up zen practice, you work your way through a schedule that's mapped out somewhat by the tradition, based on certain experiences all students have shared throughout the centuries.

A good teacher will offer guidance on the path. But whether you get through all those koans, stages of insight, asana or breathing exercises is besides the point - Practice and realisation are not separate.

In case six of this same collection of koans we are told that at one of the Buddha's sermon's he simply picked a flower from the earth and twirled it before the assembled audience.

Mahakasyapa, one of the Buddha's disciples, simply smiled. The only one out of the entire assembly. This was apparently enough for the Buddha to name Mahakasyapa as his successor and trustee of the Buddha Way thereafter, and this incident, although said to be a later addition to the tradition, sets in motion the entire zen lineage to come.

But what exactly did Mahakasyapa attain? What is that smile, really?

“I don't know”, Bodhidharma a.k.a “The Old Barbarian”, might reply with. So how then can it transform our lives?

Aitken roshi called that smile ‘Right Dharma’, and said when a person comes into the dokusan room with that grin across their face, it's unmistakable.

After Hakuin Zenji heard the story of Yantou, he decided he might as well give up and make a name for himself in the poetry and calligraphy circles of his time. But this was a short lived distraction for him however, and he eventually returned to his rigorous routine of zazen. One night, the last on a solo retreat in which he hid himself in a shrine room for seven days, the boom of a distant temple bell reached his ears. “My body and mind completely dropped away” he recalls, “and I rose clear of even the finest dust. Overwhelmed with joy, I hollered at the top of my lungs, “Old Yantou is alive and well!”¹⁰

There's nothing esoteric about Hakuin's statement, it's precisely to the point. He finally saw the Old Barbarian intimately, and they both approved each other.

“If an ordinary person realizes, he or she is thus a sage. If a sage understands, he or she is thus an ordinary person.”

We might say that what the ordinary person realises is the realm of non-attained buddha, the supremely pervading, surpassing wisdom. This is what Xingyang is trying to wake us up to. The flipside of that, understanding in the relative sense only, refers to the monk's state of mind and his inability to break free from the realm of the intellect. But I can't help feel though that Wu-men is offering some sort of caution to us not to get caught up in only this way of seeing things. Even saying that ultimately there's no difference between the two, sage and ordinary person, feels a little sticky if you think you can still give it an extra push. Sometimes you're an ordinary person buddha completely free to realise, and sometimes you're a sage buddha completely free to understand.

¹⁰ Waddell, *Wild Ivy*, p. 26

Wu-men's verse:

"Better than knowing the body is knowing the mind in peace;

When the mind is realized, the body is no longer anxious.

"When body and mind are fully realized,

The saintly hermit declines to become a noble".

"Better than knowing the body is knowing the mind in peace;

I thought about paraphrasing this with, "better than knowing the world of form, the phenomenal world, is knowing the world of no form, of emptiness". This is the realm of the Supremely Pervading buddha. It is close, but still not quite the Wisdom that surpasses.

Seeing the empty one world can bring about a clarity and peace to our everyday lives. We see everything for what it's worth. Nothing in the way it seems, nothing to worry about. Nothing at all, supremely pervading emptiness. Women's inclusion of the word 'better' seems to set this up nicely. Seeing into emptiness is the beginning of bringing your life into balance from the more often than not default position world of form. In the context of the case, the monk only knew the forms—An ancient buddha, an expensive zafu, ten kalpas of practice.

When the mind is realized, the body is no longer anxious.

One thing we don't have to get anxious about is getting on our cushion. Sure we get distracted and maybe even anxious about what's ahead once the zazen is over, we all must attend and attain the day, but there's something about zazen that you don't need to worry about, something extremely deep yet apparent that can't be expressed even in talking about body and mind. You just sit and that's ok, the entire universe is taken care of. You are free just to be yourself.

When body and mind are fully realized, The saintly hermit declines to become a noble

Bankei says, "If you harbor the least notion to become better than you are or the slightest inclination to seek something, you turn your back on the Unborn buddha mind. There's neither joy nor anger in the mind you were born with—only the Buddha-mind with its marvelous illuminative wisdom that enlightens all things".¹¹

Ordinary Mind is the Way we are told. But it is indeed special—the hermit in question here is indeed saintly. Bankei's Unborn Buddha Mind is definitely marvelous.

¹¹ Waddell, *The Unborn*, p. 138