

Sixth Patriarch – Hui Neng

The Sixth Patriarch, Hui Neng (638-713 AD), who had the surname Lu, was a native of Xinzhou (Xinxing County, Guangdong Province) in the Tang Dynasty. He was appointed as the Sixth Patriarch by the Fifth Patriarch, Hong Ren, due to his verse – “Fundamentally there is no Bodhi tree, nor stand of a mirror bright, since all is void from the beginning, where can the dust alight?”

Receiving Dharma in Huangmei

When Hui Neng was young, he was suddenly awakened by the Diamond Sutra and went to Huangmei to follow the Fifth Patriarch, Hong Ren, who secretly transmitted the Dharma to him and passed him the symbolic objects of succession, his kasaya robe and alms bowl.

Enlightening in Huaiji and Sihui

Hui Neng followed the instruction of his master to live in seclusion in Sihui and Huaiji, where he communed with sky and earth, interacted with birds and animals, and mingled with the people, thus gaining an enlightenment of the Dharma. Hui Neng gained a greater grasp of Buddhism as a result of his seclusion for more than 10 years, and with his indomitable spirit and tenacity, he carried forward and transformed Zen Buddhism into a unique Buddhist culture that is “adapted to Chinese culture and oriented towards daily life”.

Debate on Wind and the Moving Flag in Guangxiao Temple

In the first year of the Tianjian in the Southern Liang Dynasty, Tripitaka Master Zhi Yao arrived from India with a Bodhi tree seed, which he planted in Faxing Temple (now Guangxiao Temple), and prophesied that long afterwards, a bodhisattva would be ordained beneath this tree. After many years, Hui Neng reached here and was valued by the presiding monk, Yin Zong, for his “Debate on Wind and the Moving Flag”. Hui Neng received the tonsure from Yin Zong under the Bodhi tree that Tripitaka Master Zhi Yao had planted, and Hui Neng then undertook Upasampada ordination performed by Master Zhi Guang. Following his ordination, Hui Neng began teaching in the Guangxiao Temple, and was esteemed by monks and believers of Guangzhou.

Carrying forward Buddhism in Caoxi

After being ordained at the Guangxiao Temple, Hui Neng moved to the Baolin Temple in Caoxi (now the Nanhua Temple) the following year. When he was invited to preach in the Dafan Temple in the town, a numerous crowd was attracted to participate, and it was a great event at that time. Hui Neng has taught at Nanhua Temple for 37 years, and his “Preaching of the Maha Prajna Paramita and the teaching of the formless precepts” constitutes the main body of the “Platform Sutra”.

Nanhua Temple is the origin of “Southern Zen Buddhism”, where the Sixth Patriarch, Hui Neng, carried forward Buddhism, and is also known as the Bodhimanda of the Sixth Patriarch. The temple houses a number of objects of the Sixth Patriarch, Hui Neng, including the incorruptible body of the Sixth Patriarch, kasaya robe embroidered with 1,000 Buddhist images, and a sacred decree given to him by the Empress Wu Zetian.

Passing away at the Guoen Temple

Guoen Temple, originally named “Baoen Temple”, was built by the Sixth Patriarch, Hui Neng, to repay the kindness of his parents. It is also the place where the Sixth Patriarch, Hui Neng, passed away. During the Shenlong era of the Tang Dynasty, the temple was titled “Guoen Temple” by an edict, and now has a history of over 1,300 years. Guoen Temple, Guangxiao Temple in Guangzhou and Nanhua Temple in Caoxi are the three ancestral courts of the Sixth Patriarch, Hui Neng.

Eternal Platform Sutra and Imperishable Body

After the Sixth Patriarch, Hui Neng, had passed away in the Guoen Temple, his imperishable body was placed in the Nanhua Temple for worship. The statue is 80cm in height, with the Sixth Patriarch seated cross-legged in his kasaya robe, folding his hands in front of his stomach in a meditative position. After the Sixth Patriarch had passed away, his disciples collected his quotes to compose the “Platform Sutra” (also known as the “Platform Sutra of the Sixth Patriarch”), which turned out to be a classic of Zen Buddhism. The souvenir sheet features the iconic imperishable body of the Sixth Patriarch and the “Platform Sutra of the Sixth Patriarch”.

Author: Sun Jiang Tao

Translation: NextVector Consultants Ltd.