The Three Vehicles’ Twelve Divisions of Teachings

Recently I have been giving talks on passages of the *Record of Linji* that I find especially interesting. I will continue doing so throughout this retreat, and today I’d like to focus on an early section of the text, in which a lecture-master asks Linji about the Three Vehicles’ twelve divisions of teachings. Let me start by reading their dialogue.

A lecture-master asked, “The Three Vehicles’ twelve divisions of teachings reveal Buddha-nature, do they not?”

“This weed patch has never been spaded,” responded Linji.

“Surely the Buddha would not have deceived people!” said the lecture-master.

“Where is Buddha?” asked Linji.

The lecture-master had no reply.

“You thought you’d make a fool of me in front of the Counselor,” Linji chided.

“Get out, get out! You’re keeping the others from asking questions.”

Linji went on to say, “Today’s Dharma-assembly is concerned with the Great Matter. Does anyone else have a question? If so, ask it now! But the instant you open your mouth you are already way off. Why is this so? Don’t you know? Venerable Sakyamuni said, ‘Dharma is independent of words, because it is neither subject to causation nor dependent upon conditions.’” (pp. 1–2)

A lecture-master is a person who studies scriptures in an attempt to elucidate doctrinal Buddhism as opposed to Zen, the direct awakening to Buddha-nature as the source of scriptures. Monks who engage in such study are referred to as “scholars of the various facets of Buddhist
teaching," and the head of a group of these monks is called a lecture-master. In any case, a lecture-master steps forth and asks the kind of question one would expect from a scholar of doctrine. In effect, he is asking, “Even the Three Vehicles’ twelve divisions of teaching elucidate Buddha-nature, do they not? Such elucidation isn’t done only by Zen, right?”

The Three Vehicles are the vehicle of the Śrāvakas, the vehicle of the Pratyekas, and the vehicle of the Bodhisattvas. They include both Theravāda and Mahāyāna teachings. The twelve divisions of teachings constitute an older way of classifying the Buddha’s teachings. Hence the expression “Three Vehicles’ twelve divisions of teachings” refers to all Buddhist teachings conveyed in words, to the entire Buddhist canon.

In Zen, however, we don’t rely on the Three Vehicles’ twelve divisions of teachings. The goal of Zen is a direct awakening to the source of those writings, to the essence expressed therein, to the basis of the 84,000 Dharma-gates, or to what Zen calls the “Self,” “Buddha-nature,” “Self-nature,” and “Original Face.” This direct awakening finds expression in a Zen saying:

Not relying on words or letters,
An independent transmission apart from doctrinal teachings;
A direct pointing to humanity’s True Self,
Having one see one’s nature and attain Awakening (Buddhahood).

The “doctrinal teachings” are the Three Vehicles’ twelve divisions of teachings. Their source, however, does not rely on words or letters, and it exists “apart from doctrinal teachings.” Without depending on the words and statements of Theravāda or Mahāyāna Buddhism, we awaken directly to their source, to the “Self” that is independent of doctrine.

Because this way of transmission diverges from the type of Buddhism that has been conveyed by scriptures and doctrinal teachings, it generates such expressions as “not relying on words or letters” and “an independent transmission apart from doctrinal teachings.” Further, because the Self is directly transmitted from Self to Self, we also encounter the expression “transmission from Self to Self.” This “Self” is our Original Self, our Self-nature, which is none other than the Awakened One (Buddha). Zen points directly to the Self and has us see into our Self-nature to attain Buddhahood. It is a “direct pointing to humanity’s True Self,” through which we see our original nature and attain