

The Light of the Ancient Buddhas

Ballads of Emptiness and Awakening

based on Keizan's *Transmission of the Light*

by Tai Sheridan

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Dedication

To Buddha's Body
of Clay and Light

I am part of the sun as my eye is part of me. That I am part of the earth my feet know perfectly, and my blood is part of the sea. There is not any part of me that is alone and absolute except my mind, and we shall find that the mind has no existence by itself, it is only the glitter of the sun on the surfaces of the water.

D. H. Lawrence

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Introduction

Keizan's thirteenth century *Denkoroku: The Transmission of the Lamp*, is essentially a sophisticated Zen fairytale about enlightenment and *shunyata*, the empty ground of Being. Keizan uses archetypal myths, legends, and dreams to describe the luminous and awakened Zen mind. I transformed eighteen of his fifty-three stories into lyrical renaissance poetry, a form of story telling verse that mirrors the mythic quality of the original.

Although the ballad form is usually associated with the chivalrous and romantic love tradition of Renaissance Europe, the spiritual subject matter of this book is clearly neither romantic nor chivalrous, but a deep expression and inquiry into the essence of existence-Being.

One challenge of writing this work was to express the essence of Keizan's stories while using the highly structured rhyming pattern of the Ballad, ababbcbC, where cbC is a concluding envoi with C both rhyming and repeating in all four Stanzas. I began each of the Ballads with an non-traditional four line stanza that introduces the main character and provides a structural framework for the work as a whole. The main challenge was to rhyme without succumbing to triteness, erudition, or stultification.

I hope these mythic ballads shed light on the wisdom of the early Buddhist masters, and serve as inspiration for those inquiring into their own Buddha Nature and Universal Self.

- Tai Sheridan, 2011

The Ballad of Shakyamuni the Beggar

Welcome seeker of kind wisdom
I am Shakyamuni the Beggar
with warm hands transmitting light
teaching emptiness forthright

At dawn peacefully contemplating
the brightest morning star
a profound Reality arose most flowing
within mind's deepest reservoirs
no-self a swirling cosmic samovar
mental formations empty nature shown
as the dharma ocean essence without par
may all selfish ways be atoned

In silently witnessing
things just as they are
dharma wheel of emptiness turning
beyond infinite diamond stars
now needing just one bowl insofar
as anguish at last renounced disowned
the light body transcends near far
may all selfish ways be atoned

I bequeath you wise understanding
your enlightenment my noble memoir
awaken the path of not-knowing
with Manjusri's diamond scimitar
slicing non-dual ignorance apart
the moon light a birthstone
true mind no longer marred
may all selfish ways be atoned

Transmitting the dharma flower
marrow skin flesh bone
the eightfold path for abiders
may all selfish ways be atoned

The Ballad of Kashyapa the Drinker of Light

Welcome seeker of kind wisdom
I am Kashyapa the Drinker of Light
with warm hands transmitting light
teaching emptiness forthright

Buddha raised a flower imbuing
me with light a brilliant meteor
at last true nature according
I healed afflictions I deplore
and to precepts fully swore
thus bowing to dharma most revered
nowhere an I to enlighten evermore
may the light in your life appear

From master to master this flower raising
a dharma raft to other shore
awakening mind transcending
attachments repulsions no more
luminous darkness comes to fore
intellectual concepts veer
for light is inexplicable as lore
may the light in your life appear

Please pick up self studying
yet do not ten thousand things ignore
put to rest intellectualizing
turn the light within as you explore
that nothing remains solid at core
all Buddhas arise with you here
unlike views tightly held before
may the light in your life appear

Awakening wisdom of no shore
is following Buddhas path sans fear
your mind gives birth to our founder
may the light in your life appear

The Ballad of Ananda the Joyful

Welcome seeker of kind wisdom
I am Ananda the Joyful
with warm hands transmitting light
teaching emptiness forthright

Blessed with brilliant knowing
for years Buddha's attendant resolute
with a joyful presence bestowing
while teaching dharma roots
greed hate delusions transmute
the truth dharma sweetly imparts
investigate no-thing absolute
may bliss awaken within your heart

Studying concepts hindering
emptiness has no signs or attributes
mind tends toward meandering
focusing on breath most astute
for practicing out of view and mute
examine where conditioning starts
then awaken with nothing to refute
may bliss awaken within your heart

If you aspire to awakening
examine the useless pursuit
of success as if a noble bearing
for the uncreated there is no substitute
may gain and loss uproot
before this life departs
hear echo and response of lute
may bliss awaken within your heart

When truth arises you will never be destitute
for from no existing thing are you apart
mountains rivers your true nature constitute
may bliss awaken within your heart

The Ballad of Shanavasa the Cloth Wearer

Welcome seeker of kind wisdom
I am Shanavasa of Natural Clothing
with warm hands transmitting light
teaching emptiness forthright

Formed six years in womb most nurturing
my birth Buddha with vision did foretell
a sorcerer's apprentice with facility absorbing
magical formulas and arcane spells
as a fire dragon human darkness I dispelled
now wearing natural cloth in heat rain
after Ananda transmitted me dharma well
may you not waste your life in vain

Uncreated essence the uplifting
totality each Buddha's life retells
the light within most astounding
this hidden fact not known well
how form emptiness within it dwell
nothing produced nor producer of name
transcend mountain rivers forest dell
may you not waste your life in vain

Appearances deceive in arising
materialistic sight must be repelled
one eye alone transcends categorizing
the uncreated the sinews of your body shell
examine thoroughly desires that compel
as all lineage Buddhas explain
then go where anguish hath befell
may you not waste your life in vain

With wonder ring the dragon bell
deliver beings from six realms of pain
with Buddha's seal their anguish quell
may you not waste your life in vain

The Ballad of Upagupta the Demon Slayer

Welcome seeker of kind wisdom
I am Upagupta the demon slayer
with warm hands transmitting light
teaching emptiness forthright

With Shanavasa I sat abiding
anguish of desire curtailed
then the devil attacked berating
my dignity and viciousness impaled
my noble dharma parry subtly prevailed
around him a compassion garland I aligned
made of snake and dog corpse baled
may you liberate body and mind

The devil practiced contemplating
prostrating and repenting in minute detail
taking refuges absolving
lusty passions until derailed
a mountain of repose the devil scaled
attachments left behind
as well the dusty world's travails
may you liberate body and mind

Practice going beyond seeking
stopping or attaining sure to fail
with sacred and profane abating
no inside or outside avails
just once Buddha nature must you unveil
mind a mirror an autumn moon divined
impartially reflecting pebble stone shale
may you liberate body and mind

Zen teachers by existence fail
yet no traces ever left behind
lightening in an empty sky the holy grail
may you liberate body and mind

The Ballad of Dhrtaka the Great Mountain

Welcome seeker of kind wisdom
I am Dhrtaka the Great Mountain
with warm hands transmitting light
teaching emptiness forthright

Before birth my father lay dreaming
of golden suns and heavenly fire
and rivers in four directions flowing
a jewel adorned mountain spire
his vision my selfless self entire
when all forms were completely shed
my personal self died in reality's fire
may liberation to all be spread

Upagupta taught self death transcending
yet no person nor world exists to expire
true mind neither coming nor going
not a thing any effort can acquire
no book can replace heaven's gyre
open your treasure house instead
deep within existing enquire
may liberation to all be spread

Until you attain complete awakening
all Buddhas toward you carry ire
what demon made you go seeking
speaking of truth contemptuously dire
keeping silent still phenomenal mire
smash the universe until dead
with courage invite your funeral pyre
may liberation to all be spread

Buddha's liberating wisdom afire
in emptiness the pearl of light well bred
awakening reality no self transpires
may liberation to all be spread

The Ballad of Micchaka the Sorcerer

Welcome seeker of kind wisdom
I am Micchaka the Sorcerer
with warm hands transmitting light
teaching emptiness forthright

Six eons I slaved sorcery absorbing
with one thousand sorcerers cohorts stalwart
then I demanded pure avowing
stating black arts the dharma pervert
I must the true essence assert
all sorcerers avowed at my behest
to in the dharma our minds exert
may the uncreated rest within your breast

My decadent path most self-willing
true insight my arrogance did subvert
believing as a nihilist unrepenting
my forlorn spirit unable to convert
drunk on ignorance a spiritual braggart
thinking goals the guiding lights on the quest
with blind desires I strove for comfort
may the uncreated rest within your breast

Truth like ocean waves arising
the surface undulations merely overt
deep within movement nowhere flowing
the apparent and the real must invert
death in awakening neither stasis nor inert
living dying the matter to address
mirror mind the samadhi most alert
may the uncreated rest within your breast

All natural beings exist in concert
each moment's arising wondrously blessed
the diamond light nothing covert
may the uncreated rest within your breast

The Ballad of Vasumitra the Vessel

Welcome seeker of kind wisdom

I am Vasumitra the Vessel
with warm hands transmitting light
teaching emptiness forthright

In front of me a vessel filling
emptying transforming without end
Micchaka asked if in the way according
to whom it belonged to see if I'd defend
a subject object gap that rends
the whole half rather than abides
in the uncreated which Buddha's tend
may the invisible become clarified

Clean clothes my style wearing
I bear a wine vessel others reprehend
my crazed whistling appears bastardizing
a hidden ancestry hard to comprehend
yet golden clouds from above descend
as Buddha foretold with eyes unified
he knew where in India I'd ascend
may the invisible become clarified

The vessel a symbol of my teaching
the uncreated leaves nothing to fend
each thing named in truth disappearing
each phenomenon upon all others depends
nobody existing people misapprehend
transmission of light no-thing implies
Buddha's path I sincerely commend
may the invisible become clarified

Sweet emptiness all words transcend
no conception can dharma codify
skin flesh bones marrow to apprehend
may the invisible become clarified

The Ballad of Buddhanandi the Eloquent

Welcome seeker of wisdom
I am Buddhanandi the Eloquent
with warm hands transmitting light
teaching emptiness forthright

I am gifted with eloquence higher
named after Gautama and tales allegorical
my teacher Vasumitra challenged my manner
as a sophist and dialectic adept with sharp accusal
by dismissing talk of meanings as untraditional
discussion does not carry doctrine he explained
even profundities as nature is reality aberrational
may you treasure silence with speech restrained

Vimalakirti's silence a partial truth transmitter
but still a rendering most abysmal
neither words nor silence dharma carriers
were you born blind without vision able
to see inherent essence in all things remarkable
selflessness confuses those untrained
that seek to define the sacred relational
may you treasure silence with speech restrained

Do not seek emptiness to make you holier
beyond Buddhism and Zen awaits the accessible
to a dharma outside of coming or going demure
nobody is born or dies in this profound epistle
what you call body and dreams nonessential
master Dongshan in enlightenment exclaimed
I am not It and It is I as reality transcendental
may you treasure silence with speech restrained

All walls constructed most artificial
you must penetrate where no traces remain
everywhere is free and accessible
may you treasure silence with speech restrained

The Ballad of Punyamitra the Speechless

Welcome seeker of wisdom
I am Punyamitra the Speechless
with warm hands transmitting light
teaching emptiness forthright

My teacher Buddhanandi was kindlier
than most telling me I was his kin and in-law
closer to him than my parents altogether
for acting in accord with things awakens awe
this is Buddha's most profound universal law
your light brighter than a thousand suns lit
detaching from your parents a path most raw
may you enter gently the true family I transmit

Seeing white light above my house an indicator
Buddhanandi within a saint foresaw
confirmed because speaking I could not aver
so he proclaimed me a true vessel without flaw
and thus I was the successor he oversaw
already fifty years old I must admit
before the supreme path I saw
may you enter gently the true family I transmit

Your parents are not your kin nor progenitors
and Buddha is not your path to trod
this mystery of the source only you author
eyes ears depend not upon others or demigods
people and Buddhas as they are without facade
your own mind a jewel of dharma most benefit
neither sun nor moon as your mind broad
may you enter gently the true family I transmit

Zen transmits pointing beyond written law
like a mouth hanging in space close-knit
your mind your only kin and spiritual maw
may you enter gently the true family I transmit

The Ballad of Parshva the Never Sleeping

Welcome seeker of wisdom
I am Parshva the Never Sleeping
with warm hands transmitting light
teaching emptiness forthright

While attending Punyamitra the wisest
never sleeping while studying scriptures overall
in three years penetrating the uncreated rarest
the universal scriptures which had enthralled
noumena and phenomena both pitfalls
forget fatigue and study the aggregate heap
as within each moment all forms call
may you diligently neither reject nor keep

The eve before my birth my father closest
a white elephant in his dream recalled
with lustrous jewel that shone the amplest
on tiles pebbles trees fences beings all
I beg you to this jeweled light set your resolve
for though you see appearances you are asleep
yet beware conceit when grace befalls
may you diligently neither reject nor keep

Sixty years was I in womb then forest
so eighty when upon Punyamitra I called
most said I was too old but this doubt a catalyst
to recite the precepts and shave my head bald
not sleeping during day or nightfall
becoming a vessel into which light could seep
every day is a good day the essence to recall
may you diligently neither reject nor keep

Born wherever you stand in realms all
unto death each moment must you leap
let light emanate from feet hands eyeballs
may you diligently neither reject nor keep

The Ballad of Punyayashas the Golden Ground

Welcome seeker of wisdom
I am Punyayashas the Golden Ground
with warm hands transmitting light
teaching emptiness forthright

My teacher Parshva wanting to stay abreast
of my alertness asked with subtle tact
where do I come from could I attest
I replied mind is not in movement nor rest
he asked if I was uncertain as a deeper test
I replied Buddhas the same truth did fathom
then he said you are not the Buddhas yet
may you illuminate the inner golden dynamism

While sitting under a tree my teacher loftiest
right hand pointing did not hold back
saying if it turns golden we will be blest
by a sage with intuitive and illumined knack
who will bring the surname Gautama back
and Buddhist precepts transmitted for altruism
though of the transcendental you must lose track
may you illuminate the inner golden dynamism

For three weeks with mind focused sharpest
I sat until forgetting my own mind and back
and thus profoundly awakened sweetest
liberation from Buddhists while the aphrodisiac
of enlightenment no longer a setback
nor traces of Way seeking elitism
or separating inside outside white black
may you illuminate the inner golden dynamism

All concepts will take you well off track
purity and emptiness can make you numb
Zen and Buddhas themselves subtle drawbacks
may you illuminate the inner golden dynamism

The Ballad of Ashvaghosha the Excellent in Virtue

Welcome seeker of wisdom
I am Ashvaghosha the Excellent in Virtue
with warm hands transmitting light
teaching emptiness forthright

I asked Punyayashas about truth holier
'that which does not know' his first portent
yet if not knowing the wisdom of ancestors
how can cognition or knowing be circumvent
he then cut me asunder with sharp comment
and my foolishness I did at last belie
virtue arising from the source a consequence
may the treasure of the dharma eye clarify

All Zen masters study Buddha with ardor
not through signs or sounds does it orient
the thirty-two marks not the true ancestor
eighty kinds of refinement still not an answer
sometimes eight arms three heads bearing antlers
or immersed in misery Buddha fully realized
liberate many once an awakened teacher
may the treasure of the dharma eye clarify

In infinite darkness no knowledge higher
Nowhere to discriminate or augment
it can't be found in shape or timbre
yet it follows you through eon's events
ocean waves rising falling the cosmic foment
this your original face yet don't go awry
thinking it the face of Buddha this moment
may the treasure of the dharma eye clarify

Teaching transforms folks to sages shrewder
as birth and death not feared now an ally
'not knowing' the home of the true abider
may the treasure of the dharma eye clarify

The Ballad of Kapimala the Demon

Welcome seeker of wisdom
I am Kapimala the Demon
with warm hands transmitting light
teaching emptiness forthright

When Ashvaghosha the dharma enunciator
said mountains rivers earth are Its abode
that powers and insights which arise superior
from emptiness manifest Buddha's robes
into the eightfold path I made subtle inroads
where walls and shards illumine It well hence
seeing and hearing have no limit imposed
may alertness to arisings unknown commence

As a demon I evoked my hateful power
storm winds rain out of black sky billowed
from within a flat rounded cloud lenticular
a gigantic golden dragon fire bellowed
scorching Ashvaghosha's equanimous mode
yet still he kept upon his seat bearing offense
and my tricks like rusting iron did corrode
may alertness to arisings unknown commence

I produced oceans as a trance attainer
but Ashvaghosha asked if this be followed
by oceans of essential nature worthier
out of which all realities have flowed
not a thing from outside is hallowed
once appearances no long seeming dense
no duality does original nature bestow
may alertness to arisings unknown commence

An old zen master body bent and bowed
said become a reflecting mirror whence
mind awakens all things with no abode
may alertness to arisings unknown commence

The Ballad of Nagarjuna the Supreme Dragon

Welcome seeker of wisdom
I am Nagarjuna the Supreme Dragon
with warm hands transmitting light
teaching emptiness forthright

I meditated in a stone cave deepest
whereupon a python encircled me abruptly
twas a monk transfigured for being an alchemist
mistakenly seeking truth sans camaraderie
upon meeting he awoke from one sided reverie
Kapimala asked of dharma gem proverbial
if it was form or formless in profundity
may you realize the wish fulfilling jewel

No special place exists for reality to manifest
do not cling to ancient views stubbornly
or vainly put yourself ahead of the rest
the masters abided in solitude absorbingly
only to ripen after enlightenment's clarity
you will become a spoiled seed deplorable
if training without teacher or assembly
may you realize the wish fulfilling jewel

I acquired super normal powers focused
and mastered paths with prodigious ability
upon seeing scripture titles I was blessed
yet still I was lost in paradox and ambiguity
for these outside paths were in aberrancy
only in Kapimala's discipleship classical
was the vast clear eye opened astutely
may you realize the wish fulfilling jewel

Master Xuansha stated most assuredly
the universe is a single bright jewel accessible
renunciate worldly ties with alacrity
may you realize the wish fulfilling jewel

The Ballad of Kanadeva the Ritualist

Welcome seeker of wisdom
I am Kanadeva the Ritualist
with warm hands transmitting light
teaching emptiness forthright

I was a famous spiritual philosopher
performing rituals throughout the nation
a learned intellectual and debater
the merit of good deeds my acclamation
until Nagarjuna confronted conceit so brazen
asking if enlightened nature I did revere
thus arrogance I completely abandoned
may you accord with heart mind sincere

After visiting my blessed dharma teacher
I cultivated Buddha's intimate doctrine
yet Nagarjuna tested me as a reminder
a water bowl with needle he did offer
I floated the needle on top with rapture
thus penetrating non-duality without fear
in all directions Buddha's offered flower
may you accord with heart mind sincere

We shared the teaching seat together
as did Kashyapa after his induction
like snow in a silver bowl the mind's interior
Nagarjuna became the full moon with acumen
transmitting the formless beyond secular
not wide narrow large small without limitation
the dharma of wide-open clarity consider
may you accord with heart and mind sincere

Raising eyebrows is mixing with abandon
teacher and student simultaneously disappear
like squash vine's entwining configuration
may you accord with heart mind since

The Ballad of Rahulata the Eye of the Way

Welcome seeker of wisdom
I am Rahulata the Eye of the Way
with warm hands transmitting light
teaching emptiness forthright

A garden fungus a wild treat
a rich man and son most fond of eating
by magic the mushroom sprouted complete
though picked clean from tree's twinning
a monk in believer's alms receiving
caused this when emptiness he couldn't behold
upon which hearing Rahulata's awakening
may you give up your body for dharma gold

Of Rahulata Buddha dreamed complete
a thousand years before his birthing
of refined discernment he wouldst entreat
of his utmost rejection of water exploiting
based on enlightened conscience abhorring
all defilements and desecrations one beholds
give gratitude to parents for miraculous being
may you give up your body for dharma gold

Without a clear eye just a shameless thief
receive alms of grace in daily living
not beholden by basest conceits
observe as a beginner the way revealing
don't wait 'til light from eyes are waning
truth rarer than Udumbara a thousand fold
pay back the faithful by whole self dying
may you give up your body for dharma gold

Nothing has ever existed blocking
shedding body and mind before you're old
no one to stop no stopping no self doing
may you give up your body for dharma gold

The Ballad of Sanghanandi the Stabilized

Welcome seeker of wisdom
I am Sanghanandi the Stabilized
with warm hands transmitting light
teaching emptiness forthright

At birth I could speak truth firsthand
praising dharma giving reality due
at seven tiring of pleasures grand
with a monk at home I could construe
light as essential dharma to imbue
I awoke at hearing Rahulata's overture
that he bid his apparent self adieu
may the stable selfless self be yours

One eve a heavenly light fanned
upon an even road of golden hue
I ambled to a cliff yonder and
found peace in a cave without ado
then in twenty-one days arose renewed
Rahulata visited as a provocateur
asking if mind and body were askew
may the stable selfless self be yours

Letting go of body and mind disbands
the self centered nature misconstrued
Buddha's dharma an open hand
where nothing called self accrues
teachers students meet in empty milieu
the physical elements never endure
you are the teacher the teacher you
may the stable selfless self be yours

A shame when resolve is bland
clarify transmitted light pure
throughout body mind sky sand
may the stable selfless self be yours

###

About the Author

Tai Sheridan is a poet, philosopher, and Zen priest. He transforms ancient Buddhist and Zen texts into accessible and inspirational verse. His *Buddha in Blue Jeans* series offers a contemporary approach to Buddhist philosophy and awakening.

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