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# Glimpses of Buddhanature – Lions Roar

*Guo Gu*

25–31 minutes

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**Buddhist teacher-practitioners from across traditions share personal moments that gave them insight into the true nature of mind.**

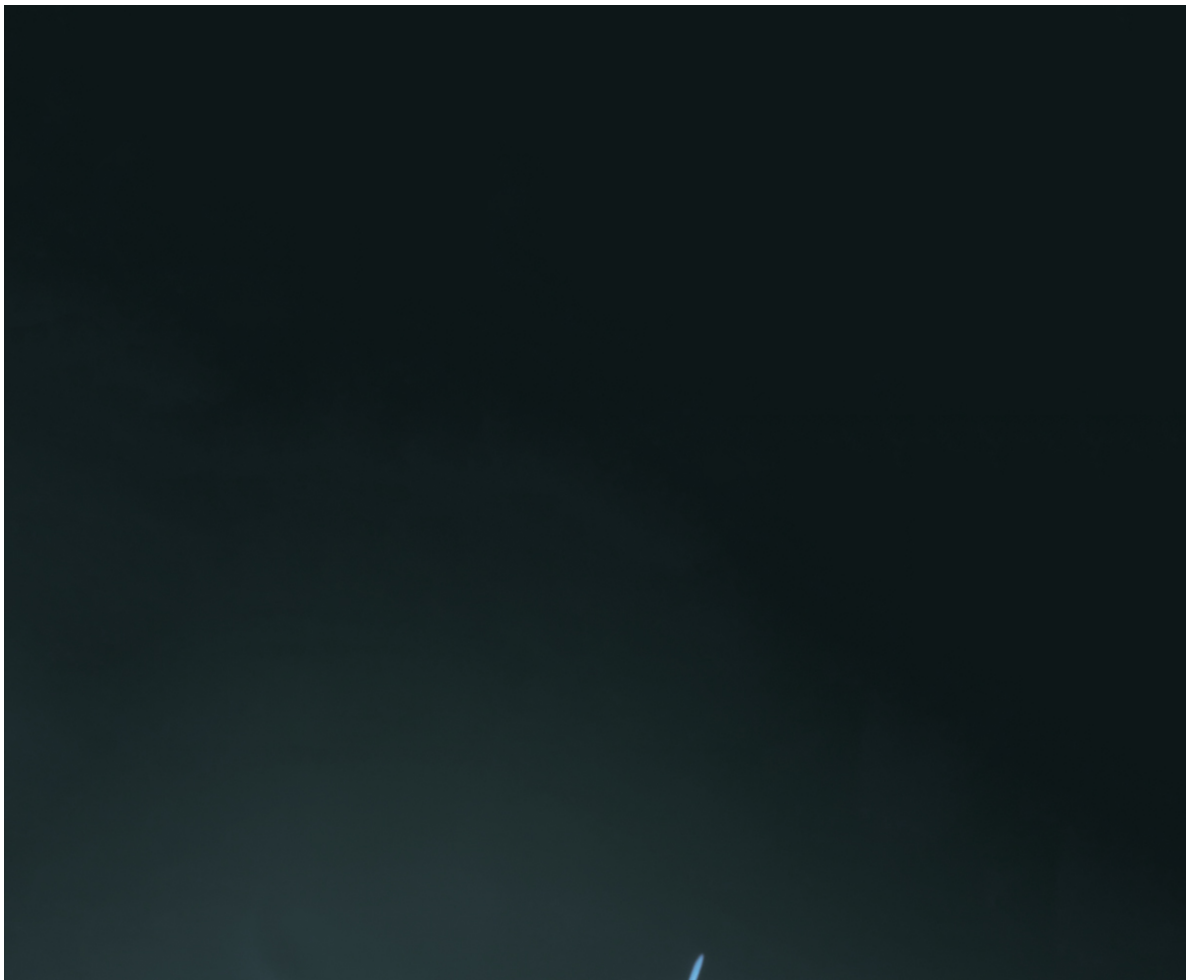




Photo by Mihai Avram.

## **A Fish Just Swims**

**By Guo Gu**

One time, a monk asked Chan master Shishuang Qingzhu (807–888), “I heard that buddha-nature is like space; is that correct?” Shishuang replied, “It’s present when you sleep; absent when you sit.” Similarly, when asked by a monk whether a dog has buddhanature or not, Chan master Zhaozhou Congshen (778–897) said, “No!” These two examples are like a fish asking another fish, “I heard that fish swim in water. Is that correct? There are such things as fish and water, right?” Ridiculous questions deserve ridiculous answers.

Buddhanature is our true nature, already free from self (Skt. *atman*), vexations (Skt. *klesas*), and delusions (Skt. *avidya*). The

personal experience of this freedom is called awakening (Skt. *bodhi*). Mahayana scriptures have already clarified that buddhanature is present everywhere, in all beings, and have provided many metaphors for it (e.g., spacious and vast like the sky or ocean)—so why ask?

**The presence of self, vexations, and delusions are imaginations. If you dismantle one, the other two can't exist.**

We ask because we are trapped in our narrow, myopic perceptions, seeing only good and bad, joy and sorrow, right and wrong, success and failure, having and lacking, fair and unfair, self and other. The self, or the “me, I, and mine,” come into being when we are caught up with these perceptions. This is delusion—it vanishes when we personally experience the emptiness of these perceptions—when we see through the veil of these constructs. This is wisdom, awakening. A fish doesn't have to imagine the “water” in swimming—it just swims. It's through swimming that the water is experienced. The important thing is to keep swimming.

Similarly, practice does not *lead* to awakening of buddhanature, which is already here. But it's absolutely important to keep practicing—swimming—but without imagined notions of having or lacking, seeking and rejecting. The fish is already in the water, and we are already free. Of course, you may think that seeking and rejecting is normal in the function of day-to-day living, but being diligent in the complexity of life doesn't mean we need to be caught up in deluded thinking.

When I was in my early twenties, I practiced so I could rid myself of vexations like guilt and fear. I sought after freedom and

awakening. I tried everything, from prolonged seated meditation (sleeping not lying down), to repentance prostrations (several hundred a day), to reading Chan texts. The more I did those things, the more entangled I became. I was seeking and rejecting. Then something shifted; I gave up all of the contrivance and just offered my life to each task at hand—body like a rag, mind like a mirror in all that I did, offering everything to support the monastery and others.

One night, when I was just about to sit down on the cushion, suddenly my body, mind, and world dropped away. At the same time, everything was present and clear. The filter of “me, I, mine” was gone. This extended into my daily life and interactions with people and events for over a month. Everything was ordinary, clear, and at peace, as if nothing was happening, yet everything was wondrous, connected, clear. Things moved but they were still; there was coming and going, but it was as if nothing had come or gone. Tasks were busily being done, but it was as if nothing was accomplished. There was no witnessing, no things, no tasks. Motion and stillness, coming and going, presence and absence were irrelevant. Responses to circumstances and things were distinct but without a reference point. Mind functioned freely when tasks required thinking, but ideas flowed without a thinker or self-consciousness. Mundane things like peeing made wonderful connections between the pee and the toilet, yet nothing had transpired. As for the Chan *gong’ans* (Jp. Zen *koans*), they became silly children’s books. There were no obstructions anywhere—obstruction and nonobstruction were irrelevant, too. Eventually, “self” subtly crept back, along with self-consciousness. Even though everything was still clear and unified, the difference

between the presence and absence of self was like night and day. Having realized the principle of practice—grasping and rejecting nothing but offering myself to all with diligence and humility—the floodgate of buddhanature would subsequently open by itself from time to time; the self would drop away during the day and in sleep.

The presence of self, vexations, and delusions are imaginations. If you dismantle one, the other two can't exist. Awakening is nothing special and has nothing to do with perceptions. Nor is there a *thing* called buddhanature. But genuine practice is necessary, and you are already free.

## Nourish the Seed

**By Myokei Caine-Barrett**

A member of our incarcerated sangha once mentioned that our presence “smelled like freedom.” It brought to mind the following quote from Nichiren Shonin (1222–1282):

A singing bird in a cage attracts uncaged birds, and the sight of these uncaged birds will make the caged bird want to be free. Likewise, the chanting of *Odaimoku* will bring out the Buddha-nature within ourselves.

His comment was an opening to further explore the concept of buddha-nature: What was it *really*? I had learned that buddhanature meant that we all have the seed of buddha within, that we possess the wisdom that illuminates that seed, and that we engage in the practice that manifests that wisdom.

Within the Nichiren tradition, we follow the bodhisattva path to fulfill the seemingly impossible promise made by Shakyamuni Buddha,

to lead all beings to awakening. Our founder, Nichiren Shonin, grounded our path in the basic practice of chanting the *odaimoku*, *Namu Myoho Renge Kyo* (the sacred title). Chanting the *odaimoku* is the “act that manifests the jewel of the buddha realm hidden within the nine realms of ordinary people.” The *odaimoku* is often referred to as the “seed of buddhahood.” We chose this path to provide a gateway for others to enter the dharma path, by living our own lives purposefully and embodying the teachings.

Most Buddhists understand the principle of the ten realms/worlds consisting of the six realms (hell, hunger, anger, animality, humanity, heaven) and four upper realms, or kinds of sages (*sravaka*, a “listener” or disciple of the Buddha; *pratyekabuddha*, one who becomes enlightened on their own; bodhisattva; buddha). These ten realms are an important element of a core concept from the *Lotus Sutra* known as *ichinen sanzen*, or “3,000 worlds in a single moment,” which indicates that these ten realms are mutually possessed: each of the ten contains the other nine. Imagine that each of us has a fundamental life condition based on the ten realms—it might be anger, or humanity, or being a *sravaka*. Mutual possession means that buddha is *also* present and it’s up to us to make that buddha manifest. The seed of each realm is within, and through practice we learn to work within those realms and manifest the buddha seed in our daily lives. As we become more mindful of the workings of these various realms, we can more comfortably and more easily overcome the lower realms and water the seeds of the buddha.

Exploration of the ten realms—and especially their mutual possession—provides a way to open us up to recognizing the experience of being exactly who we are—not to seek or achieve

perfection, simply to understand what is. As we strive to elevate the condition of our inner realms, we can examine and connect with each realm “as it is,” facing the realities of our own experiences and what they can teach us. This leads to an acceptance that we essentially have everything we need to navigate this existence so that we can truly walk the path of the Buddha. That we are able to do so underscores the fact that the buddhanature is present within—how could we find something if it did not already exist?

As I practiced with this idea, the various ups and downs in my own life became much easier to understand. Because we are not separate and can provide a mirror for each other, every being we encounter offers a gift. Even the bigots encountered allowed me to find the bodhisattva within even as anger and animality arose. I learned to respond with compassion and a healing kindness. I learned that in offering a space of compassion for another, I also provided it for myself. It was the act of following the bodhisattva path that provided a way to touch that buddhanature.

The reason buddhas have appeared in the world is to awaken us to the truth that all beings have buddhanature. And this is our task as practitioners, as set forth in the *Lotus Sutra*, chapter 7, “Parable of the Magic City”:

Expound the Dharma,  
Reveal the Dharma,  
And cause us to obtain that wisdom!  
If we attain Buddhahood,  
Others also will do the same.  
Untouchable Peace, Kokyo Henkel



Mind is originally free from all fixed reference points—in Zen it is said that “mind cannot be grasped.” At the same time, mind is luminously clear and aware—as one saying goes, “everyone is radiant light, but when looked for it can’t be found.” This empty clarity of mind is naturally and effortlessly compassionate when facing suffering, since self and other are nondual. The ungraspable, luminous, compassionate nature of ordinary awareness itself is called buddhanature.

One time during sesshin, an intensive Zen retreat, a sense of openness and ease arose, and I went to check it out with my teacher, Tenshin Anderson Roshi. I asked, “What if there’s some peace in the midst of all this suffering?” He asked me to tell him about the experience, which I did. We were walking slowly down the path during one of the breaks. He put his arm around my shoulder as we walked, and he asked, “Can anything touch it?”

The question surprised me, and I began to investigate. If an experience is any kind of object known by mind, it can be touched by ideas of good and bad, it can be grasped or rejected, it will arise and cease. Awareness itself, the empty space of buddhanature, cannot be touched by anything since it is not an experience that comes and goes. The unchanging empty space of awareness can intimately host all experiences, but is not itself affected by any of them. By looking deeply into this question as the retreat continued, confidence in the untouchable peace of ever-present buddhanature arose.

Later, when I was practicing in a Zen monastery in Japan, my teacher Tangen Harada Roshi asked me, “Why are you practicing Zen?” I said, “To end suffering.” He said no, that’s not why. I said, “To cut through all delusions and afflictions.” He again said no. I



then asked him, “Okay, why am I practicing Zen?” He definitively replied, “Buddhanature!” This was offering a liberating turning word for me—rather than looking at practice from the negative point of view, as trying to end problems, he revealed the positive point of view: that authentic practice naturally flows forth from our true nature. As Shunryu Suzuki Roshi once said, “It is wisdom which is seeking wisdom.”

I have come to see more and more how trusting in buddhanature can relieve discouragement in my own practice. By trusting that buddha-nature is always present, even if seemingly obscured, it is always possible to practice and verify it. Our usual dualistic thought is like clouds seeming to obscure the vast clear sky of buddhanature, but occasionally there’s a little hole in the clouds, a glimpse of a small spot of clear sky. From that glimpse we can infer that there’s a huge unobstructed clear sky behind the clouds—and from the point of view of the sky, the clouds don’t even obscure it in any way. The sky has no problem with clouds floating through it, since the clouds are actually made of sky.

Another benefit of trusting buddhanature that I appreciate is that it undermines the tendency to praise self and belittle others, since all beings, even cockroaches, are equally buddhanature; the true nature of all living beings, without exception, is buddhanature. And, of course, buddhanature is not exclusive to Buddhism—cockroaches aren’t Buddhist. Buddhanature is not diminished at all when it manifests as a confused living being, and it’s not improved in the slightest when it manifests as an infinitely compassionate buddha. Buddhanature never changes, because it’s unconstructed, unconditioned, unborn, undying; it’s not impermanent, it doesn’t come and go, but it’s not permanent either

because it's not a *thing*. It is simply the inconceivable inseparability of emptiness and compassionate awareness, always shining forth right here and now.

## Simple and Real

**By Qalvy Grainzvolt**

Buddhism, with its manifold jeweled nets of cause and effect and co-dependent arisings, naturally has various articulations of the concept of buddhanature. Shinnyo-en traces its idea of buddhanature through various threads of Mahayana Buddhism, which comprises a large number of sutras and commentaries. The idea that anyone has the potential to become a buddha is a prominent theme found amongst the schools of Mahayana Buddhism. As it is expressed in a key phrase found in the Mahayana *Mahaparinirvana Sutra*, often referred to as the *Nirvana Sutra*, is: “All sentient beings have a buddha-nature.”

In Sanskrit, the language in which the *Mahaparinirvana Sutra* was most likely first written, the word for buddhanature is *buddha-dhatu*. “Dhatu” conveys a sense of essence or quality, indicating that “buddhaness” is the true essence or quality of all beings, and as a result, all beings possess the possibility of becoming a buddha. It is a very optimistic approach to the nature of humanity.

The founder of Shinnyo-en, Shinjo Ito (1906–1989), became a Shingon Buddhist priest at Daigoji Monastery in Kyoto, where he received the Dual Realm Dharma transmission from Egen Saeki (1873–1951) in 1943. In Shingon Esoteric Buddhism, the objective is to make a connection with the content of the enlightenment of

Shakyamuni Buddha. This is understood symbolically as grasping something of the essence of *Mahavairocana (Dainichi Nyorai)*, the dharma body. In other words, the practitioner trains their speech, actions, thoughts, and intentions in order to cultivate their buddhanature. This is known as “*sokushin jobutsu*,” or “becoming a buddha in this body (in this lifetime).” The objective is for the practitioner to unite with the dharma body of the ever-present *tathagata* (buddha) in order to fully realize their own buddhanature.

This process, however, is restricted to initiates. In respecting Shingon tradition, Master Shinjo could not openly teach based on Shingon texts. Nevertheless, he felt an imperative to help people, monastic and lay alike, find a path to awaken their own buddhanature.

Master Shinjo’s research led him to the *Mahaparinirvana Sutra*, in which he found parallels to his Shingon experience. The idea that all beings have buddhanature, as found in the *Nirvana Sutra*, resonated with the idea of becoming a buddha in this very body, and its stress on the “ever-presence” or “continuing presence” of the buddha dovetailed with the concept of “dharma body.”

Buddhahood was a living reality that people could experience. In a sense, with this concept of “ever-presence” (*joju*), one can say that the answer to life is not death. The answer to life is more life.

Drawing on these implications, the current head of Shinnyo-en, Her Holiness Shinso Ito, said:

The dharma body, that is, the buddha’s wisdom, loving-kindness and compassion is everywhere. Dharma body refers to the essence of Buddhahood and everyone can find this within themselves. Because we possess a buddhanature, if we cultivate

it, we can resonate with the buddhas and live as a buddha would live. That is, we can live in wisdom and express loving-kindness and compassion to others.

Elaborating further, she said:

Everyone has a unique nature, a unique goodness within them, and this is connected with their buddhanature. Yet, if one focuses only on self-actualization or self-improvement, one may actually get lost or get stuck. If one tries adding “a spirit of caring for others” to self-actualization and expressing this in acts of goodness and kindness, that unique quality you have will shine more brightly as a fundamental aspect of your buddhanature. This is important since an essential aspect of buddhahood is the desire to help others out of suffering, accompanied by concrete actions for their benefit and well-being.

In this sense, buddhanature is the unique goodness and beauty that lies in each person, which is actualized through service to others.

Serving as a chaplain for essential workers in New York during the height of the Covid pandemic was a study in buddhanature for me. “Essential workers”—a term illuminated as first responders, health care, bus and train operators, for example, who continued their exhausting work throughout quarantine—were high-relief examples of the essential intrinsic goodness in human nature and its roots in Buddha potentiality. The daily refrain of pots and pans clamoring from windows and rooftops in gratitude from the quarantined was a beautiful expression of this same goodness. Buddhanature seemed especially manifest in this phenomenon. It was not a complicated formula. It was simple. And it was real.

# Unfathomable Love

By Heidi Nevin



Photograph by ©Daniel Collin

Sunrays slanted through the overcast sky, and Ganges River dolphins swam playfully beside us. From time to time, the shiny gray bulk of a hippopotamus emerged from the water's surface. It was the winter of 1999, and the great Tibetan Buddhist master, Chatral Sangye Dorje Rinpoche (1913–2015), was conducting his annual fish release. I was part of a team of twelve of Rinpoche's disciples who worked for ten days to release 94,600 pounds of live fish into the mouth of the Ganges River near Kolkata. The fish were mostly farmed silver carp destined for fish markets across

West Bengal, where they would face gruesome, untimely deaths.

Each day, twenty trucks arrived in the parking lot. The fish were weighed, dumped into fifty-five-gallon plastic buckets, and hauled on bicycle-drawn wagons to the top of the steps of the Barrackpore Gandhi Ghat, a memorial to Mahatma Gandhi. From there, we carried the sloshing buckets down the steps, past an assortment of Hindu devotees bathing in the holy Ganges River, and heaved the buckets onto wooden boats. We added a splash of dharma medicine to each bucket and clamped the lids down to keep the frenzied, thrashing fish from leaping out. “Chalo! Chalo!” we shouted to the boatmen, *“Let’s go!”*

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All day long, they motored us out to the middle of the river, where Rinpoche sat on an anchored boat reciting aspiration prayers and blowing a white conch shell. As the haunting sound of the Dharma resounded across the water, awakening all beings from the sleep of ignorance, we tipped the fish over the sides of the boats to freedom.

Tears sprang to my eyes as I watched their silvery bodies flash in the water and dart away. I was awed by Rinpoche’s unfathomable love, and I was struck by the realization that life, in all its many forms, is precious, and that saving it, no matter the cost, is the greatest possible act of giving. Indian police lined the riverbanks to prevent rogue opportunists from scooping up the newly released fish. I asked Rinpoche why he chose fish instead of some other

kind of sentient being, and he said it was because they were easier to free in large numbers and required no special care afterwards. But he was quick to point out that every kind of sentient being—even human beings—should be rescued from untimely death whenever possible.



Photograph by ©Daniel Collin

One day, many of the smaller fish were accidentally crushed by larger fish in the buckets before we could get them to the water. That evening, I noticed that Rinpoche's face was full of anguish. He was hardly able to swallow his water. When I asked him if he was feeling unwell, he looked down at me with overwhelming tenderness and said, "No, I'm not sick. All the little fish died today, and I am very sad." It was clear how genuinely he cared for each tiny life and how personally responsible he felt for their well-being.



He was in no way doing this for show. This was the liberated activity of an awake bodhisattva, a human being who had long ago thrown off the shackles of hope and fear and was working tirelessly to awaken each and every living being to their innate buddhanature.

This precious human life, as miserable and confounding as it can feel, affords us the rare chance to recognize and realize our own pristine mind nature, the buddhanature that dwells within all beings. But recognizing this requires an enormous store of merit: the merit to encounter an authentic teacher who can guide us on the authentic path to discovering our authentic condition, and the merit to live long enough to get there. One way to build this merit is to avoid harming ourselves and others, and to do our best to save the lives of those in danger, including the tens of billions of fish, animals, and birds who are killed every single day for human consumption. If we are genuinely interested in upholding our bodhisattva vows and waking up to our buddhanature, let us follow the compassionate example of Chatral Rinpoche, who avoided eating meat and spent his entire life protecting sentient beings.

## **A Song of Awakening**

**By Lama Karma Yeshe Chödrön**

Buddha Shakyamuni's first impressions after enlightenment move me every time:

This peace so profound—this unpolluted, uncreated clear light—this nectar-like dharma I have found: to whomever I may teach it, it would remain enigmatic. So I will stay silent, keeping to the forest.

(*Lalitavistara*, Sutra of the Panoramic Play)

What wonder is this that can enchant a mind so unbound into hushed humility?

Hearing the verse as the Buddha's *doha*, his hymn of realizing buddhanature, is my touchstone for discerning buddhanature—first in his teachings, then my own experience.

To begin, why might the Buddha choose not to teach? Explicit statements about buddhanature are tricky. The unabashed Tibetan *Shentong* (Empty of All Else) philosophy, infamous for not shying away from assertion, speaks of “sublime peace,” a mystical synergy beyond false binaries of permanent/impermanent, suffering/bliss, self/nonself. An enigma, to be sure. And readily misconstrued. In the reaches of the inexpressible, understanding dawns by degrees.

Sometimes silence is more articulate. The Buddha famously leaves certain questions unanswered. Nor does he mention clear light, enigmas, or buddhanature in his first public discourse, only weeks after invoking his *doha*. Instead, the Four Truths meet us in what we know all too well: life's sticky sorrow, even amidst its sweetness. The Buddha exhorts us to recognize dukkha, eradicate its origin, and actualize its cessation by relying on the path.

The Buddha's *doha* of speechless awe under the bodhi tree resounds with its signature note. Inviting it, like a tuning fork, again and again, attunes my understanding. Accompanied by its poignant pitch, I receive his instructions for liberation from samsara. From their harmony, buddhanature serenades me, urging me to enact the Four Truths.

Can anything short of fully embodying mind's true nature—wise,

loving, and powerful—be other than suffering? What greater foe is there than whatever impedes buddhanature's unbridled expression? How better to live than in alignment with the Buddha's path to liberation, extinguishing so unnatural a state, to reveal what lies hidden in plain sight? My heart pivots.

Listening to the doha sing in silence sharpens my senses. I spy buddhanature everywhere, even when my own or others' discordant thoughts, emotions, deeds, or words belie it. Like the promise of butter imperceptibly pervading milk, buddhanature is the promise of enlightenment that suffuses mind, whether unmanifest, manifesting, or manifest. Sentient beings are buddhanature—enlightenment unmanifest. Veiled by adventitious *kleshas*, we display attachment, aversion, and delusion instead. My heart breaks.

For my mercurial mind, silence sometimes feels scanty. The Prajna—paramita sutras and Madhyamaka reasonings, wielding treasure maps riddled with puzzles tucked into mazes, are just the ticket. Navigating these labyrinths of *shunyata* exhausts my conceptual mind, in thrall to *logos*. Intellect deposits me, thirsty and receptive, on the threshold of vistas beyond its ken.

Seemingly dissonant, holding paradox transmits the indescribable viscerally, instilling nimbleness. Poised, my mind hastens less to pigeonhole things. I challenge my assumptions more. Reaping the fruits along the path, we are buddhanature, manifesting as enlightenment in evolution. My heart transforms.

Yet curiosity grows insatiable, eager to savor awakening. Enter Vajrayana practice, rich in *mythos*, summoning the primal unity of appearance-emptiness in elaborate panoramas. Buddhanature

glimmers experientially. Blissful ease gentles my mind for the naked aesthetic of Mahamudra. Fleeting glimpses recall the sun emerging from clouds, luminous.

Not a tone-deaf fancy, entertaining the unfathomable empowers the supple precision of meditative awareness, readying the mind to receive what is, as it is. Increasingly capacious, we are buddhanature, manifesting as enlightenment spreading its wings. My heart blazes.

When I recognize it, buddhanature surfaces variously as affirmation, negation, epic, or silence in the Buddha's teachings. Each vibrates at its own frequency. All resonate with his *doha*.

Life events contain riches within the sweet, sorrowful, and plain. Each cradles catalysts for encouraging buddhanature's revelation from seed to bud to blossom. All is a conspiracy to enlighten me.

Elusive, I know. No matter. Let place, language, and time go. Arch back to the Buddha, walking the woods, awake, blissful, humbled by awe. Watch him weave wonder into words, letting fly a lavish rhapsody of discourse, paradox, and mystery, fluent in the ineffable. Feel our buddha-hearts quicken under his touch, straining to sing our unsung dohas.

The path unfurls, opening our heart-minds, until buddhanature manifests fully, as it ever is: *peace, so profound*, transcending self or nonself. *Unpolluted* by dualistic thought. *Uncreated*, neither permanent nor impermanent. *Clear light*, beyond suffering and bliss, *nectar-like*.

Enigmatic.

Until it isn't.

