



THE BOOK OF NOTHING

A Song of Enlightenment

SOSAN'S HSIN HSIN MING

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INTRODUCTION

The Book of Nothing, or *Hsin Hsin Ming*, as it was originally titled, was written in China at the end of the sixth century by an enlightened Buddhist monk named Seng T'san or Sosan. Seng T'san was the third patriarch in the emerging tradition of Zen which had its beginnings in China and which flowered in Japan. Sosan is the Japanese translation of the name Seng T'san. Because this ancient monk and his remarkable text are more relevant to the Zen tradition than the Buddhist one, we refer to him as Sosan.

Not much is known of Sosan, but the text he left behind is an inspiration to seekers of every tradition. It succinctly and very simply captures the essence of the empty mind that in the generations to come was to be the hallmark of the Zen tradition.

The empty mind, or no-mind, loosely describes the state in which reality is experienced without being filtered through the thought process of the mind. Without this filter, reality is experienced as completely fresh, radiant and luminous—and, as if for the first time. Inherent in this experience is a feeling of both joy and bliss.

The state of no-mind is not easily entered into. It may happen from time to time for a moment or two, but to cultivate it as a permanent state is the life long work of a very dedicated soul. Sosan was such a soul. He reached the peak of human experience known to us as enlightenment and it is from there he has written this gem.

Hsin Hsin Ming can be loosely interpreted to mean “my song.” Like the music that flows through a musician’s flute, the experience

described by Sosan is a melody that has flowed through a human voice. It is most likely that Sosan spoke these words and that they were written down by those who listened to him. Like the flute player's song, Sosan's *Hsin Hsin Ming* can never truly be sung again.



Nonetheless it has a life of its own. The beauty inherent in these few words lies in the experience they point to. The state of no-mind is a state of silence, of joy and compassion. It is the state in which life can be lived in such contentment that the corrupting desires of the body-mind cease to be a problem. For this reason, Sosan's *Hsin Hsin Ming* or *Book of Nothing* serves as an inspiration that can be read again and again and meditated upon line by line.

THE STORY OF SOSAN AND *HSIN HSIN MING*

Almost one thousand years after the death of Gautama Buddha in India, it happened that Bodhidharma, who was twenty-eighth in a direct lineage from him, had been travelling around the country for many years. Buddhists at that time were being persecuted in India, so Bodhidharma headed north towards China.

When he arrived there, more than eighty thousand Buddhist monks were already living in Chinese temples, creating an atmosphere of great devotion by performing ceremonies, teaching meditation and reciting sutras (scriptures), but not one of these monks made an impact comparable to that of Bodhidharma.

Bodhidharma's approach was a radical departure from that of traditional Buddhism. He did not go to the temples. He did not recite sutras. Instead he wandered about the country as a simple monk and encouraged those who came near to sit in silence. Then, with loud noises and sudden shocks he provoked them to have an immediate