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The Problem of Practice in Shen-hui's Teaching of Sudden Enlightenment

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After Bodhidharma (d. 532), the First Patriarch of Chinese Ch'an Buddhism, Hui-neng (638-713) is traditionally considered the most important figure in the history of Ch'an and Zen Buddhism. He is regarded as the Sixth Patriarch by the tradition which has dominated most of the major trends of the Ch'an and Zen movement in China and Japan up to the present day. Shen-hui (670-762), a disciple of Hui-neng, greatly contributed to the dominance of Hui-neng's school and its later development with his teaching of sudden enlightenment.¹

Shen-hui claimed that Hui-neng's teaching of direct and sudden enlightenment was the correct and authentic message transmitted directly from Bodhidharma as originally taught by the Seven Buddhas through the Patriarchs. He also claimed that the teaching of Shen-hsiu (605?-706), one of the most influential Ch'an priests of that time, and the northern school represented the unorthodox line of the teaching of gradual enlightenment. In 732 at a debate at the Ta-yün Temple in Hua-t'ai, Shen-hui argued against the gradual teaching of P'u-chi (651-739), the successor to Shen-hsiu, and supported the authenticity or orthodoxy of the southern sudden school. Chuang-yüan represented the northern school at this debate. Shen-hui's proposals are summarized by a modern Japanese Zen scholar, Seizan Yanagida, in four points:

- 1) Bodhidharma is the founder of the southern school and the one who transmitted the Ch'an of the Buddha.
- 2) Upon having come to China, Bodhidharma met the Emperor of Liang and rejected his actions of building temples and images, helping monks, and copying sutras as non-meritorious.
- 3) When Bodhidharma approved the enlightenment of Hui-k'o at the Shao-lin Temple in Chung-shan, he handed his robe to Hui-k'o as a symbol of the transmission of the Dharma.
- 4) This robe had been actually handed down to Hui-neng, and he is the Sixth Patriarch of the correct southern school.²

Rejecting the gradual approach of enlightenment advocated by Shen-hsiu, Shen-hui insisted that his interpretation of sudden enlightenment was the true teaching of the Ch'an, as transmitted through Hui-neng.

¹ Even though there are many biographical accounts of Hui-neng written by his followers, we still do not have historically reliable resources on his life. For example, we are not sure if Hui-neng was actually regarded as the Sixth Patriarch during his time. In this paper, I will not examine the historicity of these events, rather I will focus the problems derived from Shen-hui's teaching of sudden enlightenment.

² See *Zen no rekishi-Chûgoku*, ed. by Nishitani Keiji (Tokyo: Chikuma Shobo, 1967), p. 38.

By rejecting the gradual notion of the northern school, however, Shen-hui falls into a pragmatic problem. Criticizing the northern school's gradual way of attaining enlightenment as yet another obstacle to actual realization, Shen-hui maintained that humans are originally enlightened. Thus, enlightenment does not come about as long as one is caught in the teaching and still attached to being enlightened as the message of gradual school suggested. According to Shen-hui, one is enlightened just as one is, without the need to struggle. Shen-hui rejects the northern school's use of concentration as a method, claiming that such practice will not lead one to the goal of enlightenment. Rather, one has only to become suddenly and immediately aware of one's true nature, which is originally enlightened. Because there is nothing wrong with person from the beginning, the method of concentration as a means to enlightenment remains an un-enlightened technique, since it is still a method of attachment to external teaching.

Clearly such a critique raises the question of what is practice for followers of Shen-hui. Traditionally practice is a method or means by which one attains enlightenment. It has always been a very important part of Buddhist teaching.³ But when practice as a means is denied, what can one practically do to obtain or realize enlightenment? Is Shen-hui suggesting a different kind of practice, some kind of sudden practice, instead of the traditional practice of Buddhism? If so, then what is this sudden practice? If it is a practice, does it also serve as a means for the attainment of enlightenment? If so, then isn't this practice also gradual, i.e. used as a means to an end? We will examine these questions in light of Shen-hui's sudden teaching, especially concerning the notion of practice.⁴

(I)

Shen-hui summarized the gradual approach of the northern school in his famous four verses, which clarified the position of this school regarding meditation practice. These verses say that one is to 1) enter into *samâdhi* by concentrating one's mind, 2) view tranquility by settling one's mind, 3) illuminate outwardly by arousing one's mind, and 4) verify inwardly by controlling one's mind.⁵ It is this position that Shen-hui rejected. He maintained that such meditation practice was for low-level people, and argued that no Patriarch from Bodhidharma ever attained enlightenment in this manner.⁶ According to Shen-hui's position as long as one tries by any form, such as the method of concentrating, settling, arousing, and controlling, one is still attached to the very fact that one is trying.⁷

³ There are three types of learning, *śīla* ("precepts"), *samâdhi* ("meditation"), and *prajñâ* ("wisdom") which include all the aspects of Buddhist teaching and practice.

⁴ In *Sudden and Gradual in the Division Between the Northern and Southern Lines of Ch'an Buddhism*, a paper presented at a conference held at the Institute for Transcultural Studies in May 22-24, 1981, Robert B. Zeuschner gives three traditionally different phrases regarding the question of "gradual:" gradual teaching, gradual cultivation, and gradual enlightenment. In my paper, however, I do not specifically classify what kind of gradualness Shen-hui is attributing to the teaching of the northern school.

⁵ These four verses often appear in the *P'u-t'i-ta-mo Nan-tsung ting Shih-fei lun*. For example, see Hu Shih, *Shen-hui ho-shang i-chi* (Shanghai, 1930), pp. 285-288. These verses appear once in the *Nan-yang ho-shang tun-chiao-chieh-t'o ch'an-men chih-liao-hsing t'an-yü* (hereafter cited as the *Sermon of Shen-hui* or the *Sermon*). See Hu Shih, p. 239.

⁶ Hu Shih, p. 286.

⁷ Shen-hui says in the *Sermon* that if you try to attain enlightenment as the four verses suggest, your mind is not a mind of liberation (or freedom) but a mind bound by the Dharma, which is of no use.

For Shen-hui the highest teaching is a sudden enlightenment where one unintentionally becomes aware of his or her Buddha nature, which is originally inherent in the person. This awareness is obtained by giving up all the practices and just seeing into one's true nature. For the deluded mind an obstacle to enlightenment is the attachment to the attempt to get rid of that delusion. Attachment takes place as soon as one attempts to overcome it. Using the metaphor of polishing (practice) a mirror (Buddha nature), the gradual approach tried to polish the mirror in order to make it clean. According to the sudden approach, however, since the mirror is originally clean as it is, the act of polishing it only makes it dirtier.

Both the gradual and the sudden schools accepted the notion of the Buddha nature.⁸ According to the northern gradual school, as defined by Shen-hui, the Buddha nature can be understood as something like a possibility or a seed of becoming a Buddha. One attains enlightenment by making this possibility a reality. Just as a seed grows, so a person can become enlightened through practices of concentration. On the other hand, according to the southern sudden school, the Buddha nature is enlightenment itself. All one needs for enlightenment is simply to become aware of the Buddha nature one already is. Any attempt to become enlightened is seen as a deluded struggle. Rather one has to cast away all attempts to realize Buddha nature. At the very moment of casting away everything and thereby seeing into one's real nature, one is enlightened--the Buddha nature manifests or reveals itself suddenly.

In the *Platform Sutra of the Sixth Patriarch*,⁹ the differences between Hui-neng (southern sudden) and Shen-hsiu (northern gradual) is clearly demonstrated. One day the Fifth Patriarch Hung-jen summoned his disciples and told them to write a verse. He told them that he would give the person who wrote an awakened verse the robe and the Dharma as a sign of enlightenment as well as the position of the Sixth Patriarch. Because Shen-hsiu was the head monk and the most intelligent student, the rest of the monks did not have the courage to write a verse. Knowing this and even wondering if he should write a verse, Shen-hsiu finally decided to compose one. He secretly wrote his verse on the central section of the south corridor wall:

The body is the Bodhi tree,
The mind is like a clear mirror.
At all times we must strive to polish it,
And must not let the dust collect.¹⁰

Reading the verse, Hung-jen realized that Shen-hsiu still had not attained enlightenment.

See Hu Shih, p. 239.

⁸ I am not insisting here that Ch'an doctrine is solely based on the theory of the Buddha nature. I am using this theory as a model to give a clearer picture of the difference between the gradual and sudden positions and teachings.

⁹ The text was written by Shen-hui or some later group. See three theories presented by Carl Bielefeldt and Lewis Lancaster, "T'an Ching (Platform Scripture)" *Philosophy East and West*, vol. 25, no. 2, pp. 200-201. This text was probably composed much later than the works of Shen-hui.

¹⁰ My citation from the *Platform Sutra*, comes from the translation by Philip B. Yampolsky, *The Platform Sutra of the Sixth Patriarch* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1967), p. 130. The rest of the citation from other sources is my own.

Even so Hung-jen called all his disciples to practice and revere the verse, because it was good for common people's practice. By practicing according to this verse they would not fall into the three realms of evils.¹¹ While Hui-neng was pounding rice, his work at the temple, he heard a boy recite this verse. Hui-neng asked the boy to take him to the wall and because the boy was illiterate had someone else write his verses:

Bodhi originally has no tree,
The mirror also has no stand.
Buddha nature is always clean and pure;
Where is then room for dust?

The mind is the Bodhi tree,
The body is the mirror stand.
The mirror is originally clean and pure;
Where can it be stained by dust?¹²

Hung-jen, realizing that Hui-neng was awakened, secretly transmitted the Dharma of sudden enlightenment, the robe, and the position of the Sixth Patriarch. The difference between Shen-hsiu and Hui-neng is clear: Shen-hsiu urges one to polish the mirror (Buddha nature) in order not to let the dust collect, while Hui-neng claims that since the mirror is originally clean and pure, there is no need to polish it--one is already enlightened as he or she is.

It is possible, though dangerous, to conclude here that according to the southern school one does not have to do or should not do anything at all to be enlightened, because if one tries to do something, like polishing the mirror, it is still attachment, like staining the mirror. Thus, giving up everything and doing nothing at all, like a dead person, is the best way because doing-nothing does not stain one's originally pure and clean nature.¹³ While this radical interpretation is logically and theoretically possible, it is not correct. Hui-neng's verses do not say that we do not do anything at all. Rather they advocate an enlightened experience obtained by realizing one's originally enlightened mind. What is opposed is Shen-hsiu's style of being caught in an attachment to his own intentional endeavor, which prevents a person from seeing his or her true nature. Hence, Hui-neng and Shen-hui reject the notion of striving for enlightenment because the intentionality, which is attachment, negates the very attempt. But this rejects gradual practice, without which a practitioner cannot even begin training

(II)

Thus the central problem of the sudden school lies in its notion of practice. While in the northern school of gradual enlightenment as propounded by Shen-hsiu, practice is explicit (concentrating, settling, arousing, and controlling one's mind), in the southern

¹¹ The three lower realms in *samsâra* are the hells, hungry ghosts, and animals which one experiences as a result of evil acts.

¹² Yampolsky, p. 132.

¹³ We might even say that we do not even need Buddhism or any other teaching, if we are Buddhas or enlightened ones from the very beginning.

school, there is no specific notion of practice, because it rejects practice as preventing one from seeing into his or her true nature. For the southern school we just become aware of our true nature without any intentional attempt or method of practice. If we faithfully follow the southern school position, we must realize that if we “try” to become aware of our true nature (it seems one has to try at some point), this very attempt becomes the practice that Shen-hui rejects as preventing us from actually seeing our true nature. The southern school tells us that such attempts will not work. Because we must begin somewhere, we confront the problem of the sudden teaching.

One of the important concepts of the southern school is *wu-nien* or no-thought, which is used to convey the idea of true thought or thought without attachment. As the main doctrine of the *Platform Sutra*, no-thought is “to be unstained in all environments.”¹⁴ The text further explains:

The Dharma of no-thought means: even though you see all things, you do not attach to them, but, always keeping your own nature pure, cause the six thieves to exit through the six gates. Even though you are in the midst of the six dusts, you do not stand apart from them, yet are not stained by them, and are free to come and go.¹⁵

No-thought is, therefore, neither a human construct nor an intentional method like concentration for the attainment of enlightenment, rather it is natural, free, unbounded thought. The text continues by saying that “being free and having achieved release is known as the practice of no-thought”; however, if you “cause your thought to be cut off, you will be bound in the Dharma,”¹⁶ which points to the fact that intentional methods prevent a person from seeing his or her true nature.

Following the *Platform Sutra*, Shen-hui claims that “*Tathatâ* is the substance (or essence) of no-thought.... If there is someone who sees into no-thought, although he is accompanied by seeing, hearing, feeling, and knowing, [his thought is] always empty and tranquil.”¹⁷ Thus, no-thought is un-intentional and non-purposive. It is identical with the Buddha nature as the function of *Tathatâ*, because *Tathatâ* is its substance. Therefore, if one becomes aware of no-thought, one’s mind becomes empty and, thus, enlightened. For Shen-hui, in the experience of no-thought, “*śīla*, *samâdhi*, and *prajñâ* simultaneously become identical, ten thousand practices are endowed with, and one’s knowledge becomes the same as knowledge of Tathâgata....”¹⁸ Therefore, in becoming aware of one’s true nature--“being free and having achieved release,” all the practice that is needed--“the practice of no-thought” is contained in the moment. In this enlightened experience, there is no difference among *śīla*, *samâdhi*, and *prajñâ*. For Shen-hui this practice is direct, immediate, and sudden, taking place spontaneously. Thus, the enlightened experience, which is clearly different from the gradual practice used as a means for enlightenment, is not a means. The experience simply happens--sudden practice.

¹⁴ Yampolsky, p. 138.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 153.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 153.

¹⁷ Hu Shih, pp. 240-241.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 241.

The problem of practice is not yet solved, however, because no-thought or unintentional thought takes place only after or at the time of one's experiencing enlightenment. The question still remains of what one should do before this experience of no-thought in order to realize enlightenment? The question for practitioners is that of practice itself, i.e., what means will lead to enlightenment? What can one do when practice as a means is denied? This question seems to arise from the claims made about the Buddha nature and the originally enlightened conditions of humans.

(III)

When Śākyamuni the Buddha realized enlightenment some 2500 years ago in India, there was no specific teaching on the Buddha nature or original enlightenment. The Buddha, at least, did not realize enlightenment via the doctrine of the "Buddha nature," as later developed. He reportedly became awakened through *dhyāna* or *samādhi*, realizing the principle of *pratītyasamutpāda* ("dependent coarising"). Buddha's discovery was that life is fundamentally *duhkha* ("suffering") and the cause of suffering is an ignorance or attachment to whatever is impermanent. Because everything is impermanent and transient, suffering is inevitable because of the human craving to attach to the impermanent world, including his or her ego self. The goal of the Buddha's teaching, then, is to get rid of suffering by becoming liberated from it, thereby attaining *nirvāna* or enlightenment. The inevitability of suffering is explained through the teaching of cause and effect. For example, the Twelve-fold Formula of Causation traces the cause of old age and death, the cause of fundamental suffering, back to ignorance and teaches that we can become liberated from suffering by getting rid of ignorance.¹⁹

By examining the way of attaining enlightenment in early Buddhism, we see that the idea of the Buddha nature was not specifically spelled out and that the point of teaching is to get rid of, or become free from, ignorance. This appears to be a very gradual teaching. After the Buddha entered into *Mahāparinirvāna*, his followers gradually developed an idea that humans are originally good at least in terms of being capable of attaining enlightenment, otherwise a person could not become a Buddha. Ideas such as *tathāgata-garbha*²⁰ and the Buddha nature were introduced and developed, especially by *Mahāyāna* Buddhists.

At the beginning of the development of these ideas, the Buddha nature was understood as a possibility or something like a seed which grows as one cultivates it to Buddhahood. With this assumption, Buddhists practiced, in the gradual sense, working for their seeds to bloom fully. Without practice one could not achieve the highest goal of Buddhahood. Without practice one remained in the realm of *samsāra* or birth-and-death, caught in ignorance. We find this idea of practice explicitly stated in the well-known

¹⁹ See for example, David J. Kalupahana, *Causality: The Central Philosophy of Buddhism* (Honolulu: The University of Hawaii, 1975), p. 141.

²⁰ A notion of *tathāgatagarbha* is explained by Diana Paul in "The Concept of *Tathāgatagarbha* in the *Śrīmâlâdevî Sūtra* (*Sheng-men ching*)" *JAOS* 99.2 (1979), p. 191: "The compound *tathāgatagarbha* (*ju-lai-tsang*) has two constituents, *tathāgata* signifying "thus come" or "thus gone," designating a Buddha, and *garbha* signifying "womb, inside, middle, interior of anything...a fetus or embryo, child, brood." *Tathāgatagarbha* would then signify the womb or the embryo of the Tathāgata. The potentiality of becoming a Tathāgata is represented by the fetus or embryo nature of *garbha*.

Mahâyâna text, *Mahâparinirvâna-sûtra*, to which even Shen-hui often refers to substantiate his position of a person's capacity for enlightenment.

As the idea of the Buddha nature developed, it was enlarged from just a possibility (seed) to the claim that one is already and originally enlightened. Thus, the path for Buddhists became the realization of one's original nature as he or she already is. If one attempts to polish his or her original nature, the very attempt becomes a sign of not understanding one's true nature and an obstruction actually seeing it. The more this idea of the Buddha nature is stressed, the less important the gradual process becomes.

Shen-hui's teaching of sudden realization that one is already always a Buddha is the most extreme form of this type of Buddhism. Rather than a search for enlightenment via a gradual cultivation, Shen-hui proposes a realization of the reality that one is already fully enlightened due to one's original nature.

Even though Shen-hui argues for no-thought as the practice of the sudden teaching, we must argue that we cannot reject the gradual approach to practice. While the sudden teaching is an awakened experience, the gradual practice is necessary before the experience of enlightenment. Even in the gradual approach to practice, when one attains enlightenment it is always sudden and immediate at that moment. In the sudden teaching one needs to start with something, a practice of some sort, which in practice is always gradual, otherwise one does nothing. Thus, what Shen-hui advocates is really the realization experience itself after one goes through gradual practices.²¹ When one finally gives up the practice, which can only be done through practice, one realizes his or her true nature. At this moment the Buddha nature reveals itself within one's mind as one's true self. But it is this method of the northern school that Shen-hui explicitly rejects.

Shen-hui's rejection of the northern school seems to have been the result of a serious conflict between the two schools. Whatever the actual conflict was, Shen-hui put too much emphasis on sudden teaching which rejected the human effort of gradual practice. While it is evident that Shen-hui rejects the gradual practice as a means to reach enlightenment, we still need to examine if he also rejects gradual teaching in terms of "gradual enlightenment."²² Gradual enlightenment can be understood as a series of enlightening experiences which get deeper and deeper as one realizes or awakens to oneself. Sudden enlightenment, on the other hand, is the direct and final awareness at one moment. If Shen-hui rejects gradual enlightenment in his critique of the northern school, then there is a contradiction in Shen-hui and the southern school. In the *Platform Sutra*, for example, Hui-neng, the Sixth Patriarch, experiences different levels of awakening. In his youth, upon hearing the *Diamond Sutra*, Hui-neng recalls that his mind became clear and he was awakened--initially awakened. He was immediately awakened again when he heard the Fifth Patriarch expounding the *Diamond Sutra*. When Hui-neng left the temple after receiving the robe and Dharma as the Sixth Patriarch, he was again instantly enlightened.

²¹ In fact, the *Platform Sutra* admits that the gradual teaching of Shen-hui is good for common people's practice, since they will not fall in the three realms of evils if they practice according to the verse Shen-hui composed on the wall. Hung-jen, for example, summons his disciples and tells them to burn incense before the verse.

Although the *Platform Sutra* puts down the northern school, it is not extremely critical of gradual practice. We find many accounts which suggest a gradual approach, especially toward the end of the text.

²² This is similar to Zeuschner's third classification of gradual.

These episodes in the life of Hui-neng evidence gradual enlightenment and illustrate the contradiction within the southern school.

One way to explain Hui-neng's gradual enlightenment is that the *Platform Sutra* was written much later than Shen-hui's works.²³ When Shen-hui was preaching (or writing) his *Sermon*, he had to emphasize the sudden teaching because the northern school was influential. At the time of completion of the *Platform Sutra*, however, the message of Shen-hui had gained the upper hand over the northern school. Therefore, the southern school could adopt Hui-neng's gradual deepening awakening, because there was no threat of being criticized by the northern school which had declined in influence.²⁴

One could argue that Hui-neng's series of awakenings were episodes of the same enlightenment, not a gradual process of deepening his enlightenment. One could also argue that these different enlightenment experiences were used to demonstrate the superiority of the *Diamond Sutra* over the *Lankavatâra Sutra*, the primary text of the northern school, since Hui-neng's awakening episodes were frequently associated with the *Diamond Sutra*. While these are possible interpretations the fact still remains that the text explicitly presents that Hui-neng had different awakening experiences.

Concluding Perspectives

We have seen that in terms of practice, if one over-emphasizes the sudden teaching based on an original Buddha nature, then one of necessity ignores gradual practice as a means to enlightenment. It would seem, then, that one should do nothing in order to reach enlightenment. From the evidence we have, it appears that Shen-hui emphasized the suddenness of enlightenment in order to establish his school against the northern gradualists. This need to establish differences between these schools seems to have led him to over-emphasize sudden enlightenment and to reject practice as a means to enlightenment. I would argue that he is right in claiming that in the experience of enlightenment, practice itself is an enlightened experience, therefore practice is no longer used as a means for the attainment of enlightenment. But Shen-hui does not provide much help for those who have not yet had this experience of enlightenment, seemingly leaving us with no means or method to reach that end.

While Shen-hui does not provide explicit practical aids for practice, on careful reading of his works, we find an indication of a form of practice. What Shen-hui suggests is that we just become aware of whatever occurs in our minds. For example, "when afflicted mind arise, become aware of it," because this "awareness is the original nature of non-abiding-mind."²⁵ Here he seems to be indicating that just becoming aware of one's afflicted mind itself is a kind of practice. One becomes enlightened when one really sees his or her mind, since this mind, though afflicted before realization, is originally pure and enlightened in its essence. If this is a practice, it clearly differs from that of Shen-hsiu who advocates a "concentration" of one's mind. Rather than concentration, Shen-hsiu proposes "becoming aware" of one's afflicted mind, i.e. seeing into one's own original nature. But if

²³ The Tun-huang manuscript, the oldest surviving version of the *Platform Sutra*, was written sometimes between 830-860. See Yampolsky, p. 90. Shen-hui lived between 670 to 762.

²⁴ P'u-chi, the great successor to Shen-hui, passed away in 739 and a debate between Shen-hui and Chuang-yueh took place in 732. The northern school died out in the 9th century. See Yampolsky, p. 37.

²⁵ Hu Shih, p. 249.

Shen-hui's awareness is a practice, the essential problem is not resolved. "Trying to become aware" of one's afflicted mind inevitably becomes a human endeavor, something like concentration before realization, which is what Shen-hui argued prevents one from becoming aware. Without some kind of gradual practice as a means, there is no place for practitioners to begin. Therefore, I would argue that practice and enlightenment cannot be separated,²⁶ practice is a method for the attainment of enlightenment before one's actual realization and practice is equal to enlightenment only when one is enlightened. From this perspective, Shen-hui's position seems to lack adequate method. But his teaching of sudden awakening correctly points to the enlightened experience as the core of Buddhism.

²⁶ We find an explicit idea of "practice and authentication are the same," advocated by a Japanese Soto Zen founder, Dôgen, and called *shushô-ittô*. See Hoyu Ishida, "'Genjôkôan': Some Literary and Interpretative Problems of Its translation" in *Scientific Reports of Shiga Prefectural Junior College* No. 34, September 1988, pp. 77-88.