

CH'AN BUDDHISM IN CHINA

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INTRODUCTION

Over the past twenty years Zen Buddhism has become established as a world religion. "Zen" is actually the Japanese term for the Ch'an school of Buddhism that is said to have been founded in China by the Indian monk Bodhidharma(達摩) and which swept the country in a craze that reached its apogee during the Tang dynasty (A.D. 618-907). Its teachings, afterward, had flourished for over four centuries and influenced Sung and Ming dynasties' neo-Confucianism, lending it great importance in a philosophical as well as in a religious sense.

More recently there has quite a fever for Ch'an meditation in Taiwan, with the famous and the powerful sitting in meditation alongside members of the general public in pursuit of the Way of heaven.

Are we then witnessing a Ch'an revival to equal that of Tang dynasty? Is this Ch'an fever a temporary escape from pressure for modern-day people? Or is it the manifestation of an increasing desire to clarify the mind so as to understand one's true nature and face up to one's true self? These are some of the questions which we would try to answer.

But before we can answer those questions, we need to understand the historical development and the characteristics of Ch'an Buddhism in China. Therefore, in this article, we will discuss the historical background of Ch'an Buddhism, the development of the texts and the hermeneutics of Ch'an Buddhism, the contemporary Ch'an Buddhism in Taiwan, and the Christian response to the Ch'an Buddhism respectively.

I. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF CH'AN BUDDHISM IN CHINA

1.1 Early Development of Ch'an in China

It is said that when Sakyamuni(釋迦牟尼) was preaching on Spirit Vulture Peak, the Brahma presented an offering of golden pineapple flowers. Sakyamuni took the flowers with a smile, meaning that he declined to transmit the Buddha truth. The disciples were stunned, but just then Mahakasyapa(迦葉) stood up with a smile and the Buddha said:

*Mine is the treasury of the eye of the true Dharma,
the ineffable heart of nirvana;
let the ultimate reality that takes no phenomenal form
be confided to Mahakasyapa.¹*

This marked the beginning of the Ch'an school's doctrine of "a tradition outside the dogma, one that is not written down, which points directly to human heart, so that one may obtain enlightenment by beholding the Buddha-nature within oneself."

Mahakasyapa, according to this legend, was the founding patriarch of this school, while the 28th patriarch in succession being Bodhidharma, the founder of the Ch'an school in China. In China, Bodhidharma 達摩 is a widely familiar figure, although most people's impression of him tends to be confined to the legend of his crossing of the Yangtze River on a single reed, or to novels of derring-do recounting his exploits as patriarch of the Sholin(少林) school of martial arts. Few indeed know where he came from, what he did or what his true contribution was.

Legend has it that Bodhidharma was the third son of a southern Indian king. Having dedicated himself to the service of Prajnatara, the 27th patriarch of the Ch'an school, he journeyed from India to China during the reign of Emperor Wu (A.D. 502-550) of the Southern Liang dynasty, arriving at Canton and thence traveling on to Nanking to meet Emperor Wu, himself a fervent Buddhist. After the disappoint encounter with Emperor, Bodhidharma is said to have traveled to Mt. Sung. Here he sat in meditation facing a stone cliff, not to rise again until nine years had passed.

In the sixth year a monk named Shen-kuang came to Mt. Sung to seek the Buddha truth. To demonstrate his sincerity, Shen-kuang even drew a sword and cut off his own left arm. After being accepted as Bodhidharma's disciple, Shen-kuang took the name Hui-k'o (慧果, 487-593), meaning "wisdom makes things possible." Hui-k'o was the second patriarch of Ch'an school in China.

These are some of the best known stories about Bodhidharma. But having studied historical materials from Japan and Tung Huang Cave, Dr. Hu Shih, the most famous Chinese scholar in twentieth century, concluded that the claim that Bodhidharma became the 28th patriarch of the Ch'an school was fabricated by the Northern Sung monk Chi-sung.² He also indicates that the Ch'an school existed in China and its

¹. Tung, Rong. "Bodhidharma: First Patriarch of Ch'an Buddhism," *Sinorama*, Feb. 1991, p.43

². *ibid.*, p.45

doctrines were already studied there prior to Bodhidharma's arrival. Even the brilliant dialogue with Emperor Wu of the Liang dynasty was a later fabrication. And as for Hui-ko, there was indeed such a person, although his severed arm was an injury sustained on the battlefield. Dr. Hu Shih deduced that Bodhidharma must have arrived in China around A.D.470, and had died by A.D.534.

On the other hand, Ruth Fuller Sasaki, the well-informed historian of American Zen Buddhist, also writes:

*Today we know quite clearly that Chinese Ch'an did not originate with an individual Indian teacher and that many of its roots lay deep in native Chinese thought.*³

Sasaki suggests that, around the time that the deeds of Bodhidharma in China are dated, numerous Buddhist meditation masters might have wandered throughout the country. With good reason, the monks Seng-chao (A.D. 384-414) and Tao-sheng (A.D. 360-434) stand as forerunners of the Ch'an movement. From earlier on in the course of its sinicization there flowed into Buddhism a broad stream of Taoistic thought, an influence that is particularly in evidence in the Ch'an movement.⁴

Seng-ts'an (d.606), the third of the Chinese Ch'an patriarchs, numbers among the disciples of Hui-k'o. He is credited with having authored Chiseled Words of the Believing Heart, a poetic work of strong Taoist stamp.

During the time of the fourth and fifth patriarchs, Tao-hsin (580-651) and Hung-jen (弘忍, 601-674), there was a change in the social situation of the Ch'an movement. While the earliest Ch'an, figures were wandering monks, later Ch'an disciples now lived in monastic communities centered around the patriarchs. Living in cloisters, the Ch'an disciples combined concern with the spiritual appropriation of the way of Ch'an with housework and labor in the fields. The change in Ch'an life brought about an incorporation of the movement into the country's social structure and broadened its base in Chinese society.

1.2 The Northern and Southern Schools

It is only relatively late that one can speak of a Northern school and a Southern school. There were, however, different lines of succession for the northern and southern Ch'an disciples after the fifth patriarch Hung-jen. The father of the Northern school is Hung-jen's disciple Shen-hsiu(神秀) (605?-706), who at the advanced age of fifty was accepted into the monastic community on Eastern Mountain and quickly came to be regarded as "first disciple."

Endowed with the Dharma seal of the fifth patriarch, Shen-hsiu worked from the Yu-ch'uan Ssu for the dissemination of Ch'an meditation and achieved fame as a meditation master, earning at a ripe old age the favor of the imperial palace. His two disciples P'u-chi(651-739) and I-fu(658-736) likewise enjoyed reputations beyond reproach, only slightly tarnished by their involvement in the struggles surrounding the

³. Quoted by Heinrich Dumoulin in "Ch'an" of **The Encyclopedia of Religion**, McMillan, 1987, p.185

⁴. *ibid.*, p.186

succession of the sixth patriarch. Nonetheless, the school fell into a rapid decline and died out.

On the other hand, Hung-jen's younger disciple Hui-neng(慧能) (638-713) was the founder of the Southern school and was to become the sixth patriarch of the Ch'an lineage. The *Sutra of the Sixth Patriarch*, which has no historical grounds for credibility, included Hui-neng's autobiography. In the sutra, a quarrel between Shen-hsiu and Hui-neng was recorded. With great care Shen-hsiu arrived at this verse:

*The body is the tree of bodhi (enlightenment),
The mind is like a clear mirror.
Take care at all times to wipe it clean,
Allow no speck of dust upon it!*⁵

In sharp contrast to this finely honed and logically irrefutable verse stands that of the "illiterate" Hui-neng:

*Originally there is no tree of bodhi,
Nor is there a stand with a clear mirror.
From the beginning no single thing exists,
Where then is a grain of dust to cling?*⁶

These lines showed the high level of enlightenment of Hui-neng. Therefore, according to the sutra, Hung-jen had presented with the robe and begging bowl, insignia of the patriarchate.

However, the question of the authorship of the *Sutra of the Sixth Patriarch* remains unresolved to this day. Experts date the earliest copy, the so called Tun-huang text discovered in the caves of Tun-huang, between 830 and 860.⁷ Among the several sources that apparently flow together in the sutra is the important contribution made by Shen-hui (670-762), Hui-neng's disciple, and his circle of disciples.

But the split between the Northern and Southern schools was the outcome of the Great Dharma Assembly called by Shen-hui on 15 January 732. The assembly set as its goal the "separation of the true from the false." Shen-hui argued that enlightenment was not achieved gradually as Northern school suggested, but happened suddenly, as if at a single stroke. Thus, in the history of Ch'an Buddhism these two opposing stand-points have been condensed efficiently into the formula "suddenness of the South, gradualness of the North."

From the time on the victorious Southern school was considered the only rightful, authentic bearer of the Ch'an tradition. This Ch'an was also known as the "Ch'an of the Patriarch."

According to the doctrinal instructions of Hui-neng, enlightenment occurs in a sudden awakening of wisdom to the "seeing of nature." It requires no washing away of defilements since even a defilement is identical with nature. The "nature" seeing in

⁵. *ibid.*, p.187

⁶. *ibid.*, p.187

⁷. *ibid.*, p.187

enlightenment - also called proper nature, self-nature, original nature, wisdom nature, or Dharma nature - is the same as the Buddha nature. This doctrine of "the Buddha nature of all living things" plays an important role in Hui-neng's teaching. Wisdom sees through emptiness, but it is a seeing of non-seeing.

From the time of Hui-neng, the *Diamond Sutra*, a short but highly expressive text belonging to the group of *Prajnaparamita Sutra*, was given a position first rank in Chinese Ch'an. But according to another tradition, *the Nirvana Sutra* is the first Mahayana text that Hui-neng encountered. His practice of Ch'an rests on a foundation of the doctrines of perfect wisdom and the Buddha nature.

Therefore, Chinese Ch'an reached its zenith in the Ch'an of the patriarchs of the Southern school, but only with the third generation after Hui-neng. After the persecution of Buddhism in the year 845, many flourishing schools were unable to recover from the damage they had sustained. Ch'an, which had spread throughout the country, demonstrated its vitality and vigor of action.

1.3 The Five Houses of Ch'an

Around the end of the Tang dynasty and during the Five Dynasties period (907-960), the "five houses" of Ch'an were formed. The term Five Houses did not signify organized establishments, but rather, as the name suggests, family groups that cultivated their own particular customs and literary genres.

(1) The House of Kuei-yang (Japanese, Igyo). This was the first of the five houses. Named after the two mountains, Kuei and Yang, on which stood the cloisters of the founders Kuei-shan Ling-yu (馮山靈佑 771-853) and Yang-shan Hui-chi (仰山慧寂 807-883). A unique feature of the house was the technique of the "perfect figure" or "circle." One availed oneself of the image of the circle to express completeness and reality.

(2) The House of Lin-chi (臨濟Japanese, Rinza). This would become the leading Ch'an school in the Sung dynasty, took shape under Lin-chi I-hsuan (d.866). The collection of his saying bears witness to the sharp mind and pure character of this highly gifted master. Distinctive of the house are the threefold and fourfold dialectical formulas Lin-chi presented his students for practice.

(3) The House of Ts'ao-tung (曹洞 Japanese, Soto). This owes its name to its two founders, Tung-shan Liang-chieh (807-869) and Ts'ao-shan Pen-chi (840-901). The most significant dialectical formula (the "five ranks") in Ch'an Buddhism originated in the House of Ts'ao-tung. But the formula of the "five ranks" did not remain restricted to the House of Ts'ao-tung but became common property in Chinese Ch'an and Japanese Zen Buddhism.

(4) The House of Yun-men (Japanese, Ummon). It is distinguished by its method of the "pass of a single word" practiced by Yun-men Wen-yen (864-945), an outstanding master from the period of the Five Dynasties. Questioned on the essence of Ch'an or enlightenment, the master makes an extremely brief but pertinent reply, often using no more than a single word. Unfortunately, the House of Yun-men was destined to be short-lived, yet the contribution it made to Chinese art and culture is a significant one.

(5) The House of Fa-yen (Japanese, Hogen). It is the last of the Five Houses. Its founder, Fa-yen Wen-i (885-958), was highly educated and familiar with both Chinese

classics and Buddhist literature. As a Ch'an master he would repeat the same word or phrase, without adding any explanation. He had appropriated completely the Hua-yen (Japanese., Kegon) philosophy and strove to lead his disciples to experience the vision of inner unity of the six marks of being: totality and differentiation, sameness and difference, becoming and disappearing. However, this house died out with its founder.

1.4 Later Development after the Sung Dynasty

The houses of Lin-chi and Ts'ao-tung developed into schools representing Chinese Ch'an Buddhism during the Sung dynasty (960-1279), and the Lin-chi school acquiring a dominant influence. Lin-chi master Shih-shuang Chu-yuan (986-1039), by force of his personal reputation and connections in high places, secured Ch'an entry into imperial circles and the upper classes.

During the Sung dynasty, the number of temples and monks in the Lin-chi school increased, and magnificent temple buildings arose to which smaller cloisters were attached. Under the powerful protection of the regime, the privileged system of the Five Mountains and Ten Temples took shape during the Southern Sung dynasty. All temples and cloisters covered by this system belonged to the Yang-ch'i branch of the Lin-chi school.

In the mean time, the beginning of the pre-modern period is marked by the great political, social, and economic processes of change that transformed the agrarian-based, aristocratic society of the Chinese Middle Ages into that of late imperial China: an urbanized and bureaucratized society with a sophisticated urban civilization that was shared by an elite of gentry and rich merchants. Confucian values increasingly predominated.

Therefore, Sung dynasty witnessed a powerful "Neo-Confucian" revival, in which "earlier Confucianism was expanded into a vast scholastic system including a metaphysical superstructure that incorporated certain Buddhist ideas."⁸ The encounter between Ch'an Buddhism and Confucianism in this period was more than an interesting historical episode. It also marked the final stage of Ch'an's vitality in China. Neo-Confucians did not permit the positive Ch'an's influence to lead to any essential changes in their own worldview. Heinrich Dumoulin comments that:

*Neo-Confucians were indebted to Ch'an for their own energetic exploration of new metaphysical terrain, but they used these discoveries to build a new and more relevant Confucian system that was to hold religious and intellectual ascendancy in China for centuries to come.*⁹

Under such circumstances, Buddhism declined steadily, though not in quantitative terms. The decline was mainly intellectual: the interest of the cultured minority shifted from Buddhism to Neo-Confucianism. This shift ultimately reduced Buddhism to a despised creed of the lower classes, with the exception of Ch'an, which in a much petrified form maintained its popularity in some intellectual circles.

⁸. Zurcher, Erik. "Buddhism in China," in **Buddhism and Asian History**, edited by Joseph M. Kitagawa and Marck D. Cummings. MacMillan, 1987, p.148

⁹. Dumoulin, Heinrich. **A History of Buddhism: India and China**. p.277

The doctrinal impoverishment of Chinese Buddhism is also shown by the disappearance of most of the schools of Buddhism in T'ang dynasty. There was a general tendency toward syncretism and mutual borrowing, by which the earlier schools gradually lost their identity. In Ming dynasty (1368-1644), only Ch'an and popular Pure Land devotionism remained as recognizable trends of Buddhist thought and practice. Syncretism became the prevailing trend: the idea of the "basic unity of the Three Teachings" (Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism) gained great popularity.

Within Ch'an Buddhism, the Yang-chi line of Lin-chi school absorbed all other schools and lines - including the Ch'ao-tung school.¹⁰ In Ch'an monasteries, the invocation of Amitabha was practiced in combination with sitting in meditation. Moreover, in Ming period we see a complete fusing of all Chinese Buddhists schools and sects. Thus popular Buddhist religion embraced Amidism, Kuan-yin veneration, and Ch'an meditation. Classical Ch'an had come to an end in China, but not the history of Ch'an Buddhism altogether. It was preserved more purely at Zen Buddhism in Japan.

II. THE TEXTS AND THE HERMENEUTICS IN CHINESE CH'AN

Hermeneutics has traditionally involved the application of certain techniques or devices for the interpretation of texts. David W. Chappell has explored the hermeneutical methods used by two major sectarian traditions, Pure Land and Ch'an.¹¹ He not only looks for the hermeneutical devices but also for the underlying concerns and values, the preconditions and goals, that motivated and shaped the adoption of particular devices and made them meaningful.

In spite of Ch'an's reputation as an iconoclastic movement and its later fame of teaching "a special transmission outside the scriptures," its combined literary production was far larger than that of any other school of Chinese Buddhism.

But the recovery in this century of early texts from the Tun-huang caves which have not only provided us with many new materials, but also shown that some of the most important traditional assumptions were based on heavily redacted texts.¹² Thus, the present analysis of the early literary history of Ch'an must be considered tentative, since the relevant texts may have been subjected to significant revision.

2.1 The First Phase

From the very beginning and throughout most of its development, Ch'an texts emphasize both the personal, experiential nature of practice and a straightforward and direct style of teaching this practice to disciples. For example, in the *Treatise on the Two Entrances and Four Practices* Bodhidharma teaches on the authority of his own experience. The style is simple and direct, without linguistic flourishes or any appeal to outside authorities, earlier masters or lineages, or extraordinary powers.¹³

¹⁰. *ibid.*, p.286

¹¹. Chappell, David W. "Hermeneutical Phases in Chinese Buddhism," in **Buddhist Hermeneutics**, edited by D.S. Lopez, Jr., University of Hawaii, 1988, pp.175-205

¹². *ibid.*, p.190

¹³. *ibid.*, p.191

The texts which attributed to Tao-hsin (580-651) and Hung-jen (601-674) employed the question-and-answer format that had been developed as a means of conveying Buddhist teachings that were theoretical or philosophical in nature. The dialogue form was also used in Pure Land writings, but to a lesser degree than in Ch'an.¹⁴ In later Ch'an writings, of course, the quality of the dialogue changes when the actions as well as the words are seen as revealing the teaching. This development led to the creation of the distinctive Ch'an literature called "*yu-lu*" (語錄), or records of saying, in which were recorded the saying and activities of Ch'an masters.

The transmission lineages, representing the second phase, legitimize these methods, and in the third phase the *yu-lu* encounter literature is further edited and systematized into *kung-an* (公案) collections for the purpose of systematic propagation.¹⁵

The *kung-an* collections were used and interpreted precisely as tools for a personally efficacious practice, rather than merely as literary anthologies or historical records.

Shen-hsiu (606-706), an earlier Chinese Ch'an master, in the Treaties on Perfect Illumination slightly revised T'ien-t'ai categories for classifying Buddhist texts and divided Buddhism into three types of teaching: gradual, sudden, and perfect.¹⁶ He proposed that for those who were enlightened:

*You cannot understand the principle of this through an [insight] into a text [gained] during recitation.... This is an understanding [based on something] other than one's own efforts.... By meditating thus you will avoid errors.*¹⁷

This is an unusually clear statement illustrating the discontinuity of understanding derived from intimate personal experience and the normal scholastic activity of exegesis. Moreover, the passage also points directly to the fundamental hermeneutical principle of Ch'an: *texts can be interpreted adequately only by enlightened master*. It is on this basis that Ch'an makes its claim of penetrating to the "cardinal meaning" of a text, a recurring phrase used by Ch'an masters.

3.2 The Second Phase

In spite of Ch'an's claim of basing its teaching authority on personal experience, from the beginning Ch'an teachings were also interpreted with some reference to the established scriptures. Ch'an was not so radical as Gnostic who relied on spiritual inspiration as being superior to the truth transmitted in written texts or by human authorities. All Ch'an's early texts are related to some scriptural source, or to a lineage of enlightened masters. Thus the Ch'an tradition continued to possess the basic heritage of Canonical Buddhism in common with other schools of Chinese Buddhism.

But the citations of earlier texts are consistently used as "proof texts" for the particular practice and teaching that is being advocated. There is no concern to be true to the text as a whole, or to survey every part. Therefore Chappell says:

¹⁴. *ibid.*, p.192

¹⁵. *ibid.*, p.192

¹⁶. *ibid.*, p.193

¹⁷. *ibid.*, p.193

*As a consequence, the tradition is used to transcend the tradition: that is, selected quotations are drawn from the scriptures in order to legitimize ignoring the rest of the scriptures. Instead, reliance is placed on individual practice and inner realization of the truth. Interpretative distinctions are to be applied to people, not to text.*¹⁸

In spite of the Ch'an emphasis on mind and non-reliance on any external authority, the role of the enlightened master and the importance of an explicit line of transmission were used to form a substitute structure of authority and legitimacy. A major legitimizing device from the eighth century on was the "transmission of the lamp" histories of mind-to-mind transmission from enlightened masters.¹⁹

2.3 The Third Phase

When Ch'an began to systematize itself, its two primary concerns were organizing its spiritual genealogies into lineages and reducing the *yu-lu* (語錄) to more compact episodes which eventually formed the *kung-an* collections. Obviously when a lineage is constructed, it not only legitimizes those who have inherited the line but also simplifies Buddhist history by ignoring those teachers who are not part of the true line. Thus, a lineage is also a method of interpretation, segregation, and control.

The classic example is the encyclopedic *Transmission of the Lamp* (傳燈錄, composed in 1004. Besides compiling and redacting the biographies of numerous Ch'an masters, it begins with the lives and teachings of the seven Buddhas of the past and the twenty-eight Indian patriarchs and ends in the line of transmission from Bodhidharma to Hui-neng. Only Ch'an masters who had experienced the transmission of true enlightenment are considered to represent Buddhism; the rest are regarded as examples of un-enlightenment and failure.

Therefore, not only did the biographies alter historical details, but even some of the earlier *yu-lu* were redacted for the purposes of propagation.²⁰

In later periods the major hermeneutical problem for Ch'an was how to interpret the vast literature Ch'an itself had generated so that the teaching could be transmitted and understood by succeeding generations. Specifically, the problem was how to use the collected *yu-lu*, the biographies in the sacred lineage, and the *kung-an* collections. Thus, even *kung-an* that had been redacted and commented upon by earlier masters were perceived as inadequate. All props are taken away and no texts or hermeneutical methods are left, except for recourse to religious practice under an enlightened master.

When we examine Pure Land and Ch'an from the standpoint of the hermeneutics, certain functional differences and similarities become clear. Pure Land masters opted for the simple and accessible practice of appealing to Amitabha's compassionate power for rebirth in his Pure Land. The literal details and authority of the Pure Land scriptures became very important for sanctioning the setting aside of other scriptural demands, and as a guide for the interpretation of validating miracles.²¹

¹⁸. *ibid.*, p.195

¹⁹. *ibid.*, p.196

²⁰. *ibid.*, p.197

²¹. *ibid.*, p.199

By contrast, Ch'an offset the demands of the new orthodoxy of Indian Buddhist scriptures by placing its trust in the personal authority of enlightened masters, although both sectarian movements legitimized themselves (1) by reference to the sacred tradition, and (2) through the example of the lives of their spiritual masters. However, Pure Land and Ch'an relied on different scriptures, different principles, different personal experiences for their validation, and appealed to different kinds of people.²²

Therefore, these methods undoubtedly were used to justify their departure from the larger Chinese Buddhism tradition.

III. CONTEMPORARY CH'AN BUDDHISM IN TAIWAN

There has recently been quite a fever for Ch'an meditation in Taiwan, with the famous and the powerful sitting in meditation alongside members of the general public in pursuit of the Way of Heaven. Are we witnessing a Ch'an revival to equal that of the Tang dynasty? Is this Ch'an fever a temporary escape from pressure for modern-day people? Or is it the manifestation of an increasing desire to clarify the mind so as to understand one's true nature and face up to one's true self?

3.1 The Popularity of Ch'an in Taiwan

It was at the end of 1990 that Ling Chuan Temple 靈泉寺 in Taipei held a series of ten sessions of intensive meditation, called "Ch'an Seven". Only two years ago, Ling Chuan Temple's Ch'an Seven classes had no more than 70 members and all you had to do was apply to take part. Today, there are usually around 200 applicants, of whom only half are actually accepted. As for Nung Chan Temple 農禪寺, another famous Ch'an temple, it is presently holding twenty Ch'an training classes throughout Taiwan to provide special instruction.

On the other hand, the flooding onto the market of books about Ch'an has also converted a lot of interested people. For example, *Purple Bodhi*, the earliest book in Lin Ching-hsuan's nine-volume "*Bodhi*" series, has already gone into its 68th edition. *Compassionate Bodhi*, his latest book, is in its 12th edition after only six months. *Ch'an Life and the Smile of the Buddha*, by psychologist Cheng Shih-yen, has climbed the top three in the nonfiction best selling book list for several months.

Looking at it from a historical perspective, the popularity of Ch'an has always risen when a nation is on the ascendant and life is fairly comfortable. Such was the case with Tang and Sung dynasties in China and postwar Europe and America. It is at such times that people do not need to expend too much energy at work and can afford a lot of comforts. However, desire also leads to fatigue and burdens. People are seeking the new meaning of life.

Ch'an's cultivation directs at the inner world, thus, have developed into a new mode of seeking. Moreover, in attracting a large number of secular followers, especially intellectuals, this has become more than a religion.

For example, some people use Ch'an meditation for a practical purpose - as a

²². *ibid.*, p.199

"spiritual tranquilizer." Modern-day living is very tense, so people are always looking for a way to relax. Some masters of Ch'an 's temples point out that students in the beginners' Ch'an meditation class tend to be people who are pursuing good health or suffering from lack of concentration, nightmares and other various disorders. Obviously, those who come to use Ch'an for its practical value seem outnumber those who have come to pursue enlightenment as their ultimate goal.

As for those kinds of Ch'an cultivation and Ch'an books which have thrown open the door of convenience, people take differing views over the use of such relaxed and popularized methods to attract devotees and readers. Yang Hui-nan, professor of philosophy at National Taiwan University, for example, argues that:

*The requirement of religion is that it be actively concerned with life and truly liberating from worldly affairs. If Ch'an books and Ch'an meditation only temporarily ease the pressure of life and bring about a kind of insidious relief, then is it not like a modern-day kind of opium?*²³

However, famous Ch'an's writer Lin Ching-hsuan expresses no opposition. "Although their aim is practical one," he says, "their scope is cramped, but at least they can take a fresh look at them-selves." Sheng-yen, the most famous Ch'an master in Taiwan, nevertheless, strongly argues:

*Today's dissemination is just a recovery of Ch'an's original face. But to describe it has having such a beautiful face, giving people the mistaken view that it is that easy, is a way to lose face! All we say is that everyone can cultivate themselves, not that everyone can instantly become a Buddha.*²⁴

In another words, if everyone thinks they can just go through the motions and that is Ch'an, thinking they can achieve awakening in an instant, or even interpreting Ch'an's pursuit of liberation as a kind of laxity, this is not only a dilution of the study of Ch'an, it is also a changing of its true nature.

Therefore, if we ask: "Is there really a Ch'an fever?" The answer will depend on how you see it.

Compared to ten years ago, Ch'an is certainly flourishing. But the number of people from industrial, government and academic circles is really a small minority. Although the number of people who have been through Ch'an meditation at the temples is about 20,000 or 30,000, not even as many as one-tenth among them continue to practice. And the Ch'an courses that are held in Taipei's temple usually see two thirds of the students skipping classes before the course is even half way through!

Ch'an fever? "It is just an illusion," thus says Master Sheng-yen.

3.2 Popular Practice of Ch'an in Taiwan

Ch'an originally stressed teaching through nonlinguistic intuition, but the number of people who can really achieve spiritual wakening in this way is small, so more

²³. Tsai, Ventine. "Ch'an", *Sinorama*, September 1992, p.11

²⁴. *ibid.*, p.12

convenient methods had to be developed, a congregation accepted, and self-cultivation through the use of riddles, paradoxes and meditation adopted. Right now, *kung-an* and Ch'an Seven are the most popular practices of Ch'an in Taiwan.

(1) *Kung-an* (公案 Japanese, Koan)

During the Sung period, the practice of the *kung-an* was introduced into the Lin-chi school. *Kung-an* have as their content anecdotes from the lives of the Ch'an patriarchs and masters, dialogues between masters and disciples, paradoxical sayings, pithy or ambiguous statements, and strange gestures and acts.

The practice of the *kung-an* has a psychological and a meta-physical-religious relevance.²⁵ On the one hand, in striving to resolve the unsolvable, psychic concentration is intensified through steady intent on the task. This is the necessary pre-condition for the breakthrough to experience. On the other hand, the elimination of all conceptuality, in particular of every duality, points up the metaphysical-religious dimension of the practice, whose goal is an unrestricted experience of everything as one.

The master-disciple relationship plays an important role in the practice of the *kung-an*. It is not only a matter of the master presenting a *kung-an* to the disciple, but also one of accompanying the disciple in the advance of the practice, keeping informed of psychic experiences, warning against false paths, and helping in every way to reach the ardently desired goal of the experience of enlightenment.

The focus of Ch'an training in *kung-an* is to "open our spiritual eye to a new vista, a comprehensive vision in which oneness of mind and body and identity of subject and object become experienced realities."²⁶ But to open one's "Ch'an eye" is no easy task. It involves ardent searching, assiduous training and continuous practice. Indeed, for those who are sincerely committed, it is a life-and-death journey in pursuit of Enlightenment.

(2) Ch'an Seven (禪七, Meditation Week)

The Chinese character "ch'an" is a translation from Sanskrit *dhyana* and has the meaning "peaceful contemplation" or "meditation". Thus, unlike other schools of Buddhism, Ch'an does not stress chanting of the liturgy and ceremony, but emphasizes direct illumination of one's inner self.

Paradoxically, Ch'an signifies a most demanding monastic way of life despite its refusal to adhere to any prescribed rules of the Buddhist community. It was thus that the flourishing of Ch'an Seven came about.

In simple terms, Ch'an Seven is a seven-day course of intense meditation. Since the Sung dynasty, the establishment of this period of time as the limit for attaining Buddhahood has been a special characteristic of Ch'an, which has flourished down to today.

The first absolute condition for Ch'an meditation is: "Forsake the myriad volitions,

²⁵. Dumoulin, Heinrich. "Ch'an", in **Encyclopedia of Religion**, 1987, p.190

²⁶. Tu Wei-ming, "Ch'an in China: A Reflective Interpretation," in **Zen in China, Japan and East Asian Art**, edited by H. Brinker, R.P. Kramers and C. Ouwehand. Berne: Peter Lang Publisher, 1985. p.24

do not give rise to even one thought." For seven days all visual, audio and olfactory stimulations are denied in the process of concentrating on the regulation of consciousness. Not only is talking forbidden, but those who go through the seven days must control their minds and feelings, achieve clarity and not be subjected to confused and disorderly thoughts.

On most Ch'an Seven courses people are woken at 4:30 in the morning by a knock from a stick.²⁷ Apart from a morning and evening class and three meals a day, the rest of the time is spent sitting in meditation for as long as it takes to burn ten incense sticks. Each last for about 45 minutes, and to revive circulation after sitting, everyone forms a line around the meditation hall or outside where they begin to walk slowly, increasing the pace until there is final dash - a process called "incense running."

When the exercises are going at full pace, the master might suddenly bang his stick to announce a halt. Everyone suddenly stops moving while he observe just where their minds were at that to a halt? Self-control must be gasped when these exercises are being done, with the mind remaining clear and not giving rise to any thoughts.

After "incense running," sitting is resumed once again. As each incense stick is lit, the presiding monk will give a lesson on how best to work for success, for which Ch'an Seven uses various methods. The first of these is "counting breathing" which concentrates one's attention on respiration, counting to ten with each breath before you take the next breath in a cycle without break or loss of order. When this can be done smoothly, disorderly thoughts are few, uninterrupted concentration is possible and you are ready to go on to the next method, called "discussion."

"Discussion" is the raising of a big doubt or desire and thinking over where it actually comes from. If it does not originate in one's mouth, then it must come from the heart. But what then is the heart before it has given rise to such thoughts? With incessant questioning, when your felling of doubt is continuous so you are aware when acting, sitting, waking and sleeping, then you are working in the right way, can smash the ring of doubt and perceive the truth.

In the past Ch'an Seven is not open to the laity. Because, in general, and in principle, Ch'an is a system of exercise carried on by monks, and monastery has remained the basic centre of religious life. When Master Sheng-yen began organizing Ch'an Sevens for lay Buddhists at home in 1978 there would be only about ten people. But now it becomes a popular activities in the Ch'an temples. There are also so called "Ch'an Three" or even "Ch'an One" as a convenient method for people living in a busy modern society.

Master Sheng-yen, however, warns: "If you want Sudden Enlightenment from holiday Ch'an, that is a kind of magic."²⁸ Sudden Enlightenment, according to Ch'an's tradition, can only come from the shock given by a Ch'an master to someone who is internally and externally completely ready for it. There is no such thing as the "instant Ch'an."

²⁷. The detail description is quoted from the record of Chen Yu-hwei, "What is Ch'an Seven", *Sinorama*, September 1992, p.13

²⁸. Tsai, Ventine. p.11

IV. CHRISTIAN'S RESPONSE TO CH'AN

4.1 Dialogue between Christianity and Chinese Buddhism

Nowadays, when one mentions Buddho-Christian dialogue in the Far East, one thinks immediately of Japan, including the lively exchanges between Zen and Christianity. Compared with that, the Buddho-Christian dialogue in China is not as exciting or as fruitful, because China had a very different religious history. For example, when in the late sixteenth century Matteo Ricci (1589-1610) arrived in China, he first adopted the garb of a Buddhist monk. However, later on he realized that monks were not held in high regard and that he should adopt the gown of the Confucian scholar and aimed the efforts of his mission at this ruling class.

Three centuries later, most of the nineteenth century Protestant missionaries, mostly Pietist or fundamentalists, still had little patience with Buddhist monks. Buddhist monks in late imperial China were not known for intellectual achievements. They combined Pure Land devotion and Ch'an meditation. Practice so dis-placed theory that it virtually made a virtue of ignorance.²⁹ In actuality, most Chinese monks were not even deep Pure Land and/or Ch'an practitioners. They functioned more like priests, living off funeral services and penance-rituals.

Although Japanese monks lived off funeral services too, they managed to keep up Buddhist scholarship and a reflective, sectarian, commentarial tradition. In China, however, since early Ching dynasty, scriptural learning was better preserved by the educated lay Buddhists. Therefore, toward the end of the nineteenth century, the first real contact between a Buddhist and a Christian began when British missionary Timothy Richard (1845-1919) crossed paths with lay Buddhist Yang Wen-hui (1837-1911). Richard was one of the first missionaries to spread Western knowledge to China. Yang, on the other hand, had re-introduced from Japan the long-lost Consciousness Only philosophy. Together they collaborated to trans-late the *Awakening of Faith* and the *Lotus Sutra* into English.

However, it was Karl Ludwig Reichelt (1877-1952), a Norwegian Lutheran missionary, who was the most serious student of Buddhism to date. He dedicated himself to proselytizing among the Buddhists. He even turned his monastery into a mission - *Tao Fong Shan* (道風山 Wind of the Way). This mission was later moved from China to Hong Kong after 1950. Reichelt saw direct Nestorian input in the founding of the Pure Land school in Tang dynasty. He even adopted, as a symbol of his mission, a Nestorian Cross rising out of a Lotus. To him, this represented the fulfillment of the eternal Logos in the Lotus. But to his critics, this suggested the fallacy of assuming that the unique revelation in Christ was somehow continuous with or, worse, was being borne aloft by a pagan flower.

More recently a new approach is taken by Leung In-shing 梁燕城, a professor in Regent College (Vancouver). He had acquired a Buddhist training from a leading Buddhologist in Hong Kong, and later discovered the Christian faith. He read a Christian doctrine at a Buddhist level in Buddhist terms and overcame the obvious cradle

²⁹. Lai, Whalen. "Why Is There Not a Buddho-Christian Dialogue in China?" *Buddhist-Christian Studies*, 6 (1986), p.82

differences by locating the experiential core behind such doctrines.³⁰ Thus the Buddhist understanding of the consciousness clinging to an object prefigures the biblical Fall. Even omni-present Buddhahood can be tied to original sin for there is the facticity of Buddha-nature being inexplicably polluted.

Therefore, one must learn to go behind labels like atheistic Buddhists and monotheistic Christians. Lai Whalen suggests:

*A meaningful Buddhist-Christian dialogue must proceed with a radical deconstruction of its own metaphysical beliefs in order to uncover the real import of such doctrines for our times..... Only thus, and patiently step by step, may we be able to discover the structural similarities and differences between these two traditions.*³¹

4.2 Ch'an and Christianity

When Jesus encountered with Nathanael and said, "Before Philip called you, when you were under the fig tree, I saw you." Nathanael immediately acclaimed him 'Son of God' and 'King of Israel' (John 1:48-49). We may wonder what should a Christian say when he or she encounter with a Ch'an Buddhist under a fig tree (Buddhist called it bodhi tree)?

By far the deepest influence of Zen Buddhism on Christianity has been in the area of meditative practice. The use of Zen disciplines has been widespread in Catholic monasteries. But it is doubtful that the outcome of Zen practice by Christians will not affect by the unconscious beliefs and attitudes of the Zen Buddhism.

Therefore, it is important to compare the fundamentals of the Christianity and the Ch'an so that a meaningful dialogue between them can be started. Indeed, it is rather natural for Christians to find more dividing points than converging points in the two ways of thinking. Those differences need to be stressed and discussed in depth. But, in the mean time, the spiritual resemblances between Ch'an and Christianity, although not many, may also become the bridge to cross the "unbridgeable gulf" between the two religion. Thus, those similarities and differences between them can serve as the "contact points" for Christians to reach out Ch'an Buddhists.

(1) Buddha-nature and God's Image

Traditionally, the human being is understood by Chinese to have three levels. Confucianism describes human beings as having three parts: body, heart, and human nature. Human nature is seen as a gift from Heaven. But for Daoists, the three levels are called body, heart, and "original breath." This original or primordial breath is the power which animates everything, human beings and the whole cosmos. In Buddhism we also find three levels: body, heart, and "original nature." This original nature is one with what is called "Buddha nature" or "being". This Buddha nature is the fundamental ground of everything, and in itself is absolute being.

Christians, however, describe human beings as having either three (that is, body, soul and spirit) or two (that is, body and soul/spirit) parts. From Christian's perspective, it is the soul and spirit, rather than body, which are made in the image of God.

³⁰. Lai, Whalen. "The Buddhist-Christian Dialogue in China," p.625

³¹. *ibid.*, p.626

There are several implications for Christians. First of all, when people come to experience their own human nature, the Buddhists will perceive it as "Buddha nature", and Christians will perceive it as "God's image." Thus Christian's "enlightenment" may be "seeing" God's image in himself.³²

Secondly, Ch'an Buddhists, to be able to realize their Buddha-nature, should stop distinguishing, separating, defining, analyzing, describing, because these are essentially dualistic questions. Christians, on the other hand, to be able to realize their God's image, should submit themselves not to their sinful nature, but to the Holy Spirit (Rom.8:13-14). Thus, for Ch'an Buddhism, the realization of Buddha-nature is totally an experience of the cognitive and the affective dimensions. However, for Christianity, the realization of God's image is a process of not only the cognitive and the affective dimensions, but also of the evaluative - that is, the "will" - dimension.

Thirdly, Ch'an Buddhists accept all things, which have the same Buddha-nature, just as they are. Christians, on the other side, find things imperfect and therefore strive to change them. From the Ch'an point of view, not going out of one's way to do good is evidence of Enlightenment. Picking and choosing and the urge to "do goods" are evidence of Ignorance. Therefore, the freedom of the Ch'an is "the freedom not to choose." But the French Existentialist Jean-Paul Satre states correctly that "not to choose, in fact, is to choose not to choose."³³

But for Christian, the cross pictures total Involvement in the lives of others for the purpose of their re-creation into the like-ness of Jesus. Their life is toward the fulfillment of the God's ultimate goals.

(2) Life and Death

Ch'an Buddhism emphasizes that it is mistake to understand life and death as a process. People do not find themselves moving from life to death, but living *at the same time* dying. A rigid separation of life and death is abstract and unreal. Masao Abe insists that the living-dying in Buddhist teaching is neither process nor continuity. He says:

*If we actually, or subjectively, realize that we are living and dying at every moment, we will attain the paradoxical oneness of living and dying which is true of all our life - right here and right now..... It is not death as a counterpart of life, but death in an absolute sense. In Zen this is called the "Great Death," through which one attains Nirvana, having been "reborn, after thoroughly dying."*³⁴

There is a similar experience of living-dying paradox in Christianity. Paul says, "Even though our physical being is gradually decaying, yet our spiritual being is renewed day after day" (2 Cor.4:16). Therefore, this paradoxical and dynamic oneness of life and death is the experience shared by Buddhist and Christians.

However, Abe's understanding of "eternal life" in Christianity as the extension of life beyond death is not accurate even misleading. For Christians, the eternal life is the "new life in Christ" which we can enjoy and experience *right here and right now*. Eternal

³². Raguin, Yves S.J. "Christian Zen," Areopagus, 1992, p.17

³³. Quoted by Tucker N. Callaway, **Zen Way, Jesus Way**, p.238

³⁴. Abe, Masao. "Life and Death and Good and Evil in Zen," *Criterion*, Autumn 1969, p.9

life is not what Christians wish to enter after death. And the Kingdom of God is not something *there and then*, but the experience of *here and now* too.

(3) God and Emptiness

Ch'an's emphasized on "Emptiness, no holiness," and even on "killing the Buddha, and killing a patriarch," points to the necessity of overcoming a "vertical dualism." In Abe's view, the vertical duality in terms of the divine-human relationship as seen in Christianity is inseparably connected to the idea of the superiority of being over against non-being. But in Ch'an, which denies all dualities including the vertical one, there is neither the rule of God nor the idea of creation nor the last judgment.

Indeed, the fundamental vertical dualism between man and God, the creature and the Creator, the believer and Jesus Christ in Christianity are obvious. But Abe's description of God as Wholly Other is an exaggeration, if not a distortion. The vertical duality in the divine-human relationship does not imply an absolute segregation between man and God. On the contrary, the Pauline epistles and the Johannie's writings all indicate the concept of "mutual indwelling" between the believers and Christ. This vertical duality and the intimacy in the divine-human relationship is a mystery.

On the other hand, when Ch'an speaks of the oneness of all mankind, it means literal oneness. There are no individual selves. All men are one because all men are the thoughts of Only-Mind. Not merely men, but all beings - both animate and inanimate - are joined in the identity-oneness of Not-Two.

For Christians, however, the paradoxical oneness between the Creator and His creations is "harmony-oneness," but not identity. Sin fractures this harmony-oneness; repentance, trust, and re-creation restore it. If Ch'an's oneness is a solo, Christian's oneness, then, is a symphony orchestra composed of many different instruments brought together in voluntary obedience to a single baton.³⁵

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³⁵. Callaway, Tucker N. **Zen Way, Jesus Way.** p.233

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