



Project
MUSE[®]

Today's Research. Tomorrow's Inspiration.

In the Quiet of the Monastery: Buddhist Controversies over Quietism

Bernard Faure

Common Knowledge, Volume 16, Issue 3, Fall 2010, pp. 424-438 (Article)

Published by Duke University Press



For additional information about this article

<http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/ckn/summary/v016/16.3.faure.html>

IN THE QUIET OF THE MONASTERY

Buddhist Controversies over Quietism

Bernard Faure

The expression “Buddhist quietism” is a familiar one. At first glance, it seems anachronistic, inasmuch as the word *Quietism*—at least, when written with the uppercase Q—refers to a quite specific phenomenon: a form of mysticism that developed in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries through the writings of Miguel de Molinos and Madame Guyon. Thus, if it is to be used at all in a Buddhist context, the word should refer to a teaching that bears some resemblance to the doctrine of these Christian mystics. *Quietism* usually refers, in the Christian context, to a withdrawal from the world into a state of blissful and inactive contemplation or, more radically, into a relationship or even union with God that exempts the adept from any religious practice or moral concern. Of course, in the case of Buddhism, there is, in the strict sense, no question of surrender to a transcendent God. In some cases, however—for instance, in the cult of the Buddha Amitābha (or Amida)—the Buddha may function almost as a monotheistic God, and Buddhist observances can call to mind Christian devotion or Indian *bhakti*. From the perspective of affectivity, Shinran’s concept of salvation through pure faith in the Buddha Amida might be regarded as quietistic; likewise the “dancing recitation of Amida’s name” that Kuya Shōnin (d. 972) spread among Japanese Buddhists.

Was the Buddha himself a quietist? It is difficult to say, since all we have is a legend. Clearly no single term, not even one as broad as *quietism*, could do

justice to a religious phenomenon as complex as Buddhism, but could the term at least be said to characterize certain of the Buddhist schools? Chan (Zen) Buddhism, in particular, is often described as quietistic—though also, conversely, it is described as a Buddhist response to the quietist temptation. To determine how such complexity or confusion has come about will require us to consider, if only briefly, the history of the Western reception of Buddhism.

1. Western Critics of Buddhist Quietism

Soon after the brief flourishing in Europe of the doctrines of Molinos and Madame Guyon, the term *quietist* came to be used by Jesuit missionaries in Asia and by their correspondents at home to denounce various aspects of Buddhism. Meanwhile, the Jesuits in Europe had a more nuanced attitude toward Christian Quietism and even occasionally supported it for political reasons. Ignatius of Loyola himself is said to have embraced the practice of “spiritual indifference” associated with Quietism.¹

When applied to Buddhism, the term *quietist* resonates with negative connotations that are best understood in light of the controversy over Christian Quietism. In most cases, this critique of Buddhism was aimed at enemies back home. The French Protestant Pierre Bayle, in the article “Brahman” in his *Dictionnaire historique et critique* (1697), amalgamated Buddhism with Quietism, noting that Buddhism was criticized by Confucianists much as Fénelon’s Quietism was criticized by La Bruyère. Bayle compared the “extravagant” style of the Western mystics to that of the “speculative Chinese” but also conflated the quietism of Chan Buddhists with “the doctrine of Spinoza.”² Bayle found Confucianism likewise comparable to Spinozan philosophy and referred to Confucius himself as the “Spinoza of the Far East.” The writings of Spinoza were the real target of much criticism leveled at Chinese (and, by extension, Japanese) philosophy and religion at the time.³

Quietism also came to be associated with nihilism. According to the Jesuit Jean-Baptiste du Halde, the “inner doctrine” advocated by Chinese Buddhists (and, more specifically, by Chan monks) was that “a *vacuum* or Nothing is the Principle of all Things, that from this our first Parents had their Origin, and to this they returned after their Death.”⁴ Du Halde goes on to explain how this ontological notion leads to a sort of quietism:

1. See Mita Choudhury, “A Betrayal of Trust: The Jesuits and Quietism in Eighteenth-Century France,” *Common Knowledge* 15.2 (Spring 2009): 164–80.

2. See *The Dictionary Historical and Critical of Mr. Peter Bayle*, 2nd ed. (London: J. J. and P. Knapton, 1734–38).

3. For more on this topic, see Bernard Faure, “Chan/Zen in the Western Imagination,” in *Chan Insights and*

Oversights: An Epistemological Critique of the Chan Tradition (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993), 15–51.

4. Jean-Baptiste du Halde, *The General History of China: Containing a Geographical, Historical, Chronological, Political, and Physical Description of the Empire of China, Chinese-Tartary, Corea, and Thibet*, 4 vols., trans. Richard Brookes (London: J. Watts, 1741), 3:51.

To live happily we must continually strive by Meditation, and frequent Victories over ourselves, to become like this *Principium*, and to this end accustom ourselves to do nothing, to desire nothing, to perceive nothing, to think on nothing; there is no Dispute about Vices or Virtues, Rewards or Punishments, Providence and the Immortality of the Soul; all Holiness consists in ceasing to be, and to be swallowed up by Nothing; the nearer we approach to the nature of a Stone, or the Trunk of a Tree, the more perfect we are; in short it is in Indolence and Inactivity, in a Privation of every Motion of the Body, in an Annihilation of all the Faculties of the Soul, and in the general Suspension of all Thought, that Virtue and Happiness consist; when a Man has once attained this happy State he will then meet with no further Vicissitudes and Transmigrations, he has nothing to fear for the Future, because properly speaking he is Nothing; or if he is any thing he is happy, and to say every thing in one word he is perfectly like the God *Fo*.⁵

In their denunciation of Buddhist quietism, Christian missionaries found powerful allies in the neo-Confucian literati (whom they call the “Learned”):

However, the greatest part of the Learned have opposed this Sect . . . ; they attack’d it with all their Might, proving that this Apathy, or rather this monstrous Stupidity, overturned all Morality and Civil Society; that Man is raised only above other Beings by his thinking and reasoning Faculties, and by his Application to the Knowledge and Practice of Virtue; that to aspire after this foolish Inactivity is renouncing the most essential Duties, abolishing the necessary Relation of Father and Son, Husband and Wife, Prince and Subject, and that if this Doctrine was follow’d it would reduce all the Members of a State to a Condition much inferior to that of Beasts.⁶

The description of Chan meditation as quietistic was taken over—albeit with fewer negative connotations—by Engelbert Kaempfer, who visited Japan as “physician to the Dutch embassy.” In his *History of Japan* (1690–92), Kaempfer describes “*sasen*” (*zazen*, sitting meditation) as “a profound meditation of divine mysterious and holy things; which so entirely takes up a man’s mind, that his body lies, as it were, destitute of all sense and life, unmoved by any external object whatsoever.”⁷

The allegation of Buddhist nihilism continued to inspire vitriolic pages in the work of nineteenth-century ideologues.⁸ Long after the Jesuits’ withdrawal

5. Du Halde, *General History of China*, 3:51.

6. Du Halde, *General History of China*, 3:52.

7. Engelbert Kaempfer, *Histoire naturelle, civile et ecclésiastique de l’Empire du Japon*, 3 vols. (Hague: P. Gausse and J. Neaulme, 1732), 2:61. See also Béatrice M. Bodart-Bailey, ed., *Kaempfer’s Japan: Tokugawa Culture Observed* (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 1999), 178.

8. On this question, see Richard Welbon, *The Buddhist Nirvana and Its Western Interpreters* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968); Roger-Pol Droit, *The Cult of Nothingness: The Philosophers and the Buddha*, trans. David Streight and Pamela Vohnson (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003).

from China, one of the most vociferous critics of Buddhism, Jules Barthélémy Saint-Hilaire, interpreted Chan quietism as a stepping stone toward annihilation: “The doctrine of Dhyâna may therefore be considered a decisive commentary on that of Nirvana; for, as by this transitory ecstatic state a transitory annihilation is already sought, so an eternal and definite annihilation may be sought in Nirvana.”⁹ Saint-Hilaire thought it his duty to describe at length this “hideous faith,” which “shed such light on the destinies of the Asiatic world.”¹⁰

Another object of the Jesuits’ attack on quietism was the Indian monk Bodhidharma, the legendary founder of the Chan school, who was said to have “come from the West” (that is, from India). His importance in Western discourse stems basically from a misunderstanding: the first Jesuit missionaries, impressed by superficial resemblances between Buddhism and Christianity, read his Chinese name (Damo or Tamo) as a distorted rendition of “Thomas” and so initially saw in him the apostle Thomas, the legendary evangelizer of the Indies. When it became clear that Bodhidharma was not Thomas, the missionaries, apparently oblivious of their earlier enthusiasm for this solitary figure, sharply criticized him for quietism. Jean-Baptiste du Halde, for instance, wrote of Bodhidharma:

This *Tamo*, the Person so cried up, who is come out of the West into China, passed as they say nine years in the Mountain Tsong [Song shan] in continual contemplation; he continued immoveable with his Eyes fixed upon the Wall, without changing his situation, and yet this contemplative Sluggard wanted none of the Necessaries of Life, but had a plentiful Supply of all sorts of Provisions and Clothes: Suppose, after his Example, every private Person should take it in their Heads to imitate this kind of Life, what would become of the most necessary Professions? Who could take care of cultivating the Fields, and make the useful Products of the Loom? Whence would they have Garments, and Food to support Life? Can it be imagin’d that a Doctrine whose Practice, if it were universal, would put the Empire in Confusion should be the true Doctrine?¹¹

This association of Chan with quietism has proved surprisingly resilient. In the early twentieth century, the Belgian Jesuit Léon Wieger (“our indefatigable Sinologist”) held that Bodhidharma was not even a Buddhist and that the type of meditation he had advocated proved to be a fraud leading to moral corruption:

Now Bodhidharma rejected the recitations also, which were useless according to his opinion. Prohibiting all the books and all study, he set up the sole principle, of personal and individual *buddhification*, by

9. Jules Barthélémy Saint-Hilaire, *The Buddha and His Religion* (London: Routledge, 1895), 144.

10. Saint-Hilaire, *Buddha and His Religion*, 144–45.

11. Du Halde, *General History of China*, 3:277.

a kind of contemplation of his interior, which I will call *endovision*. . . . That contemplation without theme, without process, not methodical like that of the Mahayanist . . . , but purely intuitive, ought to form the only preoccupation of the aspirant to perfection. It was to that, that Bodhidharma applied himself uninterruptedly during his last years. It was in practising it that he died. Now, such contemplation cannot be sustained, as an intellectual act. The only result that it can produce, if it is practised seriously, is idiocy. And if it is not practiced seriously, that mental idleness leads fatally to immorality.¹²

A more understanding account of Bodhidharma's teaching came, in roughly the same period, from Sir Reginald F. Johnston, a Scottish academic and diplomat, resident in China: "It is this Indian sage, this searcher of hearts and scorner of books, who is regarded as the founder, in China, of the Ch'an or Contemplative school of Buddhism. 'You will not find Buddha in images or books,' was the teaching of the venerable Tamo. 'Look into your own heart: that is where you will find Buddha.'"¹³ According to Johnston, "Tamo's system has been described as 'the Buddhist counterpart of the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius of Loyola'; but there are other Christian saints and mystics with whom he may be compared even more fittingly."¹⁴ Nevertheless, Johnston still held that "there is reason to suspect that some monks who believed themselves to have attained the exalted state of mystical union were apt to confuse that state with the less honorable condition of physical somnolence."¹⁵

One of the most common criticisms made concerns Buddhism's alleged escapism, its sociopolitical quietism. This criticism was made repeatedly by the neo-Confucianists, who regarded Buddhist monks as parasites. This caricature cast a long shadow. In his praise of the Jesuit Antoine Possolino (b. 1553), the literary critic René Etiemble, for example, wrote: "He understood very well . . . that Buddhism . . . is a religion based on mysticism; that this mysticism, as it often, if not always, happens, incites man to a kind of quietism; lastly, that Buddhism could well constitute one of the metamorphoses, one of the avatars, of atheism."¹⁶ Etiemble criticizes Zen's quietism or "will to powerlessness" and its evil social effects, contrasting it with the active moral and political involvement of the enlightened mind (in the Western sense): "Someone like Voltaire requires answers on the Calas scandal or the Audin scandal. A Zenist, on the other hand, enters into Zen: like some animals that, when frightened, enter into catalepsy, he

12. Léon Wieger, *A History of the Religious Beliefs and Philosophical Opinions in China from the Beginning to the Present Time*, trans. Edward Chalmers Werner (1927; New York: Paragon, 1969), 254.

13. Sir Reginald Fleming Johnston, *Buddhist China* (London: John Murray, 1913), 83.

14. Johnston, *Buddhist China*, 84–85.

15. Johnston, *Buddhist China*, 86.

16. René Etiemble, *Connaissions-nous la Chine?* (Paris: Gallimard, 1964), 45.

chooses that happy state in which life can no longer be distinguished from death, nor untruth from truth. What a fine thing Zen is!”¹⁷

2. The Dialectic of Chan/Zen Quietism

To understand this shared critique of Buddhism, on the part of Jesuits and Confucianists, requires some understanding as well that, just as the Jesuits in China borrowed arguments against Buddhism from their neo-Confucian allies, so too was the Confucian critique of Buddhism indebted to arguments that had been directed by Buddhist schools against one another. Certain Chan schools had indeed accused each other of quietism, and Western scholars in the later twentieth century have likewise taken sides in these disputes.

Consider, for instance, the differing views taken by Paul Demiéville and J.-R. Armogathe on the divisions within Buddhism. The so-called Council of Tibet, at which the Indian master Kamalaśīla and the Chinese (Chan) master Moheyan debated the value of their respective understandings of Mahāyāna Buddhism, was termed “a controversy over quietism” by Demiéville in an erudite book, *Le Concile de Lhasa: Une controverse sur le quétisme entre bouddhistes de l’Inde et de la Chine au VIII^e siècle de l’ère chrétienne* (1952).¹⁸ This debate took place at the end of the eighth century at the Samye monastery in central Tibet, but the controversy can be traced several decades further back to a controversy over “gradualism” and “subitism” that divided the Chan movement into two factions. The “Southern school” followed the Chan master Shenhui after his attack in 732 on his Northern rivals. The Southern school and its notion of “sudden awakening” later became the Chan orthodoxy, while the Northern school, labeled “gradualist” by Shenhui, was eventually rejected as “collateral.”¹⁹ Armogathe, in a 1973 book on quietism, dealing with non-Western as well as European varieties, refers to the “gradual teaching” of the Northern school as quietist because of its alleged attachment to meditation, whereas for Demiéville it is the “sudden teaching” of the Southern school that merits the quietist label because of its antinomianism.²⁰ Here we have evidence—one piece among many—that *quietist* is an adjective of limited use in describing Chan Buddhism.

17. Etiemble, *Connaissions-nous la Chine?*, 133.

18. Paul Demiéville, *Le Concile de Lhasa: Une controverse sur le quétisme entre bouddhistes de l’Inde et de la Chine au VIII^e siècle de l’ère chrétienne* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1952).

19. See John R. McRae, *The Northern School and the Formation of Early Ch’an Buddhism* (Honolulu: University

of Hawai’i Press, 1986); and Bernard Faure, *The Will to Orthodoxy: A Critical Genealogy of Northern Chan Buddhism* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1997).

20. Jean-Robert Armogathe, *Le quétisme*, coll. “Que sais-je?” no. 1545 (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1973).

The “Case” against Meditation

The main allegation that the neo-Confucianists leveled against Buddhism was that the monasticism it sponsored was antisocial. But this criticism was directed against monasticism and eremitism in general, rather than against Buddhist quietism per se. The same reproach has of course been directed often enough against Christian eremitism—for example, in a text quoted by the intellectual historian Bernard Groethuysen:

What a strange fanaticism it is to want to convert cities into cloisters, and the palaces of princes into places of retirement for recluses! Let us blush for all eternity at these excesses, and let us not impute to religion, but to the spirit of domination by which most of these extravagant doctors are possessed, these maxims that lead only to the destruction of society.²¹

Still, the denunciation of monastic “retirement” and sociopolitical quietism is usually linked to the characteristically Buddhist monastic practice of meditation or contemplation, which the neo-Confucianists regarded as overly passive. Both influenced by Buddhism and in reaction against it, the neo-Confucianists developed a less passive form of meditation called *jingzuo* or “quiet sitting.” But again, this same kind of reaction could be found in Chan itself, either as the rebuttal of a specific form of Chan practice or as a means of distinguishing Chan meditation from the Indian Buddhist practice of *dhyāna*.

Buddhist meditation is traditionally characterized as dual in nature—as a delicate balance between a pair of complementary aspects called *samādhi* (concentration) and *prajñā* (wisdom). The founder of the Tiantai school, Zhiyi (538–97), attempted to subsume all Buddhist meditative techniques under the binom *zhi guan* (*śāmatha-vipaśyanā*): the first element, which means “calming,” is regarded as more passive, and the second (“discernment” or “examination”) as more active.²² With the development of the *Prajñāpāramitā* (Perfection of Wisdom) tradition in Mahāyāna, there arose a tendency to give precedence to *prajñā* over *dhyāna*, wisdom over withdrawal and mental focus. Chan Buddhism, and in particular the Southern school of Shenhui, was strongly influenced by that tradition, in which *prajñā* is characterized not as a mental clarity akin to *vipaśyanā*, but rather as a higher, intuitive type of wisdom or gnosis.

This tendency is also found in the *Vimalakīrti-sūtra*, where the enlightened layman Vimalakīrti scolds Śāriputra, one of the Buddha’s foremost disciples, for sitting absorbed in contemplation under a tree:

Reverend Śāriputra, this is not the way to absorb yourself in contemplation. You should absorb yourself in contemplation so that neither

21. Bernard Groethuysen, *Les Origines de l’esprit bourgeois en France* (Paris: Gallimard, 1927), 234; translation mine.

22. The type of meditation most popular in the West today, Vipassana, emphasizes “mindfulness” and is therefore seen as a form of mental “activity.”

body nor mind appear anywhere in the triple world. You should absorb yourself in contemplation in such a way that you can manifest all ordinary behavior without forsaking cessation. You should absorb yourself in contemplation in such a way that you can manifest the nature of an ordinary person without abandoning your cultivated spiritual nature. You should absorb yourself in contemplation so that the mind neither settles within nor moves without toward external forms. You should absorb yourself in contemplation in such a way that the thirty-seven aids to enlightenment are manifest without deviation toward any convictions. You should absorb yourself in contemplation in such a way that you are released in liberation without abandoning the passions that are the province of the world.²³

The kind of contemplation that Vimalakīrti favors is a radical departure from traditional meditation. Vimalakīrti's criticism of contemplation was amplified in Chan Buddhism, which—in spite of its name, derived from *dhyāna* (Chinese *channa*, hence *chan*)—came to criticize the quietistic practice of *dhyāna* for its overreliance on *śamatha* (calming, cessation). In Chan, traditional meditation was regarded as lacking in dynamism.

A further step along these lines was the Southern Chan notion of *wunian* (“no-thought”). Even when Chan texts advocate *kanxin* (“looking at the mind”), they do not mean the sort of introspection generally called “mindfulness,” since the mind in question is *wuxin* (mindless). The puzzlement created by the new Chan emphasis on *wunian* and *wuxin* explains the warnings against “cultivating blankness of mind, which is quietism,” and explains as well the recurrent advocacy of activity (whether physical or mental). While Chan no-thought is said to be pure “spontaneity,” the notion was influenced by the Daoist idea of *wuwei* or “non-action,” which is not always clearly distinguishable from mere inaction. Hence the charge of quietism, found as early as the *Platform Sūtra of the Sixth Patriarch*, the supposed autobiography of the Chan master Huineng (d. 713). In this text, Huineng admonishes his disciples: “Good friends, some people teach men to sit, viewing the mind and viewing purity, not moving and not activating the mind. . . . Those who instruct in this way are from the outset greatly mistaken.”²⁴ The Chan master Linji Yixuan (d. 867) developed the same theme: “There are a bunch of blind shavepates who, having stuffed themselves with food, sit down to meditate and practice contemplation. Arresting the flow of thought they don’t let it rise; they hate noise and seek stillness. This is the method of heretics.”²⁵

23. See Robert A. F. Thurman, trans., *The Holy Teaching of Vimalakīrti: A Mahāyāna Scripture* (Philadelphia: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1976), 24.

24. See Philip B. Yampolsky, *The Platform Sūtra of the Sixth Patriarch* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1967), 137.

25. See Ruth Fuller Sasaki, trans., and Thomas Kirchner, ed., *The Record of Linji* (Honolulu: University of Hawai‘i Press, 2009), 214.

Not everyone agreed, however, not even in the “sudden Chan” tradition. For instance, Guifeng Zongmi (780–841), a contemporary of Linji, argued that the “*Vimalakīrti-sūtra* says: ‘It is not necessary to sit.’ It does not say, ‘It is necessary not to sit.’ Whether or not to sit [in meditation] depends on what is most suited to the capacities of the practitioner.”²⁶ Apparently, Zongmi was trying to reestablish the traditional balance between concentration and wisdom, which had been upset by Shenhui. While the Linji school emphasized an “active” form of meditation focused on “cases” or riddles (*gong’an*; Japanese *kōan*), quiet contemplation remained the characteristic of the Caodong (Japanese Sōtō) school. It was labeled by its Linji (Japanese Rinzai) detractors as “silent-illumination Chan” (Japanese *mokushō-zen*), in contrast to the “Chan of word-examination” (*kanhua-chen*, Japanese *kanna-zen*) which is the practice based on the study of *kōans*.²⁷

Like the Jesuit missionaries who argued that the practitioner of Zen meditation aimed to resemble “a stone or the trunk of a tree,” the Chan master Dahui Zonggao (1089–1163) described silent-illumination Chan as a state of mind similar to “dead ashes and wood,” and he contrasted it with the active examination of *kōans* as practiced in the Linji (Rinzai) school. The Sōtō Zen master Dōgen (1200–1253), on the other hand, criticized Rinzai Zen as too goal-oriented and therefore dualistic. Instead he advocated the practice of *shikan taza* (“sitting-only”), a nondual meditation that is not a means toward an end, but the goal itself—the natural expression of awakening. In actual practice, however, the contrast between the two schools on that point was never as clear-cut as argued, and Dōgen himself is known to have made great use of *kōans*.

The “Zen apostle” D. T. Suzuki, who first introduced Zen to a Western audience, belonged to the Rinzai school and inherited its prejudice against quietistic contemplation. From his perspective, *kōans* were used primarily to keep Zen from degenerating into quietism or into a merely intellectual understanding. Suzuki rejected both Northern Chan and Sōtō Zen as quietist. Unjustifiably conflating quietism and gradualism, he also criticized the former for being “intellectualist.” Modern adepts of Zen, following Suzuki’s interpretation, often emphasize the role of *kōans* in keeping Zen free from the temptation of quietism.

Chan (Zen) Antinomianism

While Suzuki criticized the passive nature of Sōtō Zen meditation, he seemed at first full of praise for the antinomianism of Rinzai Zen. In his widely read *Essays*

26. *Chanyuan zhuquanji duxu* (*Chan Prolegomenon*), in Taishō edition of the Buddhist canon, vol. 48, no. 2015: 403, in Jeffrey L. Broughton, *Zongmi on Chan* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009).

27. Yet even *kōans* were not sufficient for a Western detractor of Chan like Léon Wieger, for whom these “incoherent, meaningless answers” were merely “exclamations which escaped from the stultified ones, momentarily drawn from their coma.” See Wieger, *History of the Religious Beliefs*, 530.

in *Zen Buddhism*, Suzuki stressed the “spiritual freedom” that rebelled against all institutional and routinized practices in the name of pure spontaneity.²⁸ As he became more aware of the dangers of antinomianism, presumably in response to the initial Western understanding of Zen as a kind of libertarianism (“Beat Zen”), Suzuki began to warn against this misinterpretation.²⁹ In an article written in 1960, he stated that “Zen is decidedly not latitudinarian, nor antinomian.”³⁰ Manual work and the use of kōans, he wrote, saved Zen “from falling into the pitfalls of antinomianism.”³¹ But a kind of antinomianism can indeed derive from the realization of (or simply holding the Chan/Zen belief in) the existence of a buddha-nature within oneself. That realization is, properly speaking, what constitutes sudden (or innate) awakening, and it sometimes does lead to the rejection of all pious works. One of the founding stories of Chan is that of Bodhidharma’s legendary encounter with Emperor Wu of the Liang dynasty. When the Chinese ruler asked the Indian monk what kind of merits he had accumulated through all his pious activities, Bodhidharma is said to have replied that these amounted to nothing.

In the *Platform Sūtra of the Sixth Patriarch*, the origin of the controversy over subitism and gradualism is traced back to verses attributed to Shenxiu (606–706) and Huineng (d. 713), two disciples of the fifth Chan patriarch Hongren (601–74). Shenxiu’s verse, expressing his reliance on quietistic meditation, reads:

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.

Shenxiu’s verse can be read as a description of gradualist practice in pursuit of purity and stillness. Huineng’s verse, on the other hand, is a perfect expression of sudden awakening:

Bodhi [awakening] originally has no tree,
The mirror also has no stand.
From the beginning not a thing is.
Where is there room for dust?³²

Huineng’s verse implies that no practice whatsoever, meditation included, is necessary for those who recognize that their mind is fundamentally pure and

28. D. T. Suzuki, *Essays in Zen Buddhism* (London: Rider, 1949–53), 1:73.

29. Suzuki, *Essays in Zen Buddhism*, 2:312.

30. Frederick Franck, ed., *The Buddha-Eye: An Anthology of the Kyoto School* (New York: Crossroad, 1982), 21.

31. Suzuki, *Essays in Zen Buddhism*, 3:314–15.

32. Yampolsky, *Platform Sūtra of the Sixth Patriarch*, 130–32.

empty and, therefore, already enlightened fully.³³ Thus, while Shenxiu's verse can be said to represent quietism in the sense of "quiet meditation," Huineng's verse represents the other side of quietism: namely, antinomianism. The latter derives in large part from the understanding of "sudden awakening" as "immediate," which is to say unmediated. Whereas traditional Buddhism had emphasized "skillful means" (*upāya*) such as ritual and meditation, the most radical forms of "sudden awakening" or subitist Chan reject all such means and proclaim a radical antinomianism.

Paradoxically, this subitist viewpoint, traditionally attributed to the Southern school, was already that of the purportedly gradualist Northern school. In a Northern Chan text, the fourth Chan patriarch Daoxin (580–651) is quoted as saying, for instance: "In the Great Vehicle [Mahāyāna], the concentration in *dhyāna* consists in not indulging in spiritual exercises, not examining one's mind, not viewing purity, not contemplating emptiness, not looking far away, not looking close up."³⁴ This antinomian tendency developed in the Hungzhou school of Mazu Daoyi (709–88). As we have seen, one of Mazu's most famous successors, Linji Yixuan, railed against those "blind shavepates" who, "having stuffed themselves with food, sit down to meditate and practice contemplation." But Linji took the further step of denying the value of any kind of practice whatsoever:

Followers of the Way, as to the buddha dharma, no effort is necessary.
Just be ordinary, with nothing to do—shit, piss, wear clothes, eat food,
and lie down when you're tired.³⁵

I say to you there is no buddha, no dharma, nothing to practice, nothing
to enlighten to. Just what are you seeking in the highways and byways?
Blind men! You're putting a head on top of the one you already have.
What do yourselves lack?³⁶

Linji's most extreme antinomianism is reflected in his famous call to spiritual murder: "If you meet the Buddha, kill the Buddha!"

At the Council of Tibet, the Chinese monk Moheyan, representing Northern Chan subitism, claimed that the buddha-nature (and, consequently, enlightenment) exists fundamentally within each of us and therefore cannot be obtained as the result of spiritual exercises. His Indian opponent, Kamalaśīla, summarized as

33. The contrast between the two positions is reminiscent of Henri Suso's distinction between "prompt conversion" (*den geswinden Ker*), which is a sudden "break-through" (*Durchbruch*), and slow "reversion" (*Widerfluz*). See Michel de Certeau, *La Fable mystique: XVIe–XVIIe siècles* (Paris: Gallimard, 1982), 229. On this question, see also Paul Demiéville, "The Mirror of the Mind," in *Sudden and*

Gradual: Approaches to Enlightenment in Chinese Thought, ed. Peter N. Gregory (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1987), 13–40.

34. See Faure, *Will to Orthodoxy*, 59.

35. Sasaki, *Record of Linji*, 185.

36. Sasaki, *Record of Linji*, 185.

follows Moheyan's position: "By the force of good and bad acts . . . beings wander in transmigration, but those who do not think and who do nothing are freed from transmigration. . . . Consequently, it is not necessary to think about anything, and there is no further need to engage in good practices."³⁷ Kamalaśīla objected that to reject pious practices is to destroy Buddhism. His disciple Jñānendra described Moheyan's approach as tantamount to the "passivity of slumber." It is essentially because of its antinomian attitude that Chinese Chan came eventually to be discarded after the Council of Tibet, in favor of a more traditional (and Indian) form of Mahāyāna that emphasized the value of pious works.

Judging by a spurious tradition that the Indian master Kamalaśīla was eventually murdered by partisans of Moheyan, the stakes of that debate were clearly high, even if they were probably as political as they were doctrinal. They appear also to have been ethical: not only did Chan antinomianism reject pious works, it also seemed to lend itself to moral laxity. Many Chan Buddhist monks became infamous as wine-drinking, brothel-going eccentrics; and similar figures can be found in Korea and Japan. The trend toward "wild" or "mad" Chan is well reflected in monastic trickster figures, who, because their focus is on ultimate truth, no longer feel obliged to follow Buddhist precepts and, instead, advocate a radical form of quietism in which pious works, rituals, and even meditation are unnecessary. Given the constraints of Asian societies, their antinomianism was in most cases bound to remain largely rhetorical and theoretical. The madness of certain monks came to be perceived as feigned—a manifestation of ideological chic or a literary topos. In medieval Japan, the antinomian tendency was represented by the so-called Bodhidharma school (Daruma-shū), which Dōgen terms the "naturalist heresy" (*jinen gedō*). Perhaps the most popular trickster figure in Zen is Sōjun Ikkyū (1394–1481), a poet-monk famous for his love affair with a blind singer and for the erotic poetry that she inspired him to compose.

Outside of Chan and Zen, an antinomian tendency is found in the *hongaku* (or "fundamental awakening") tenet of Tendai Buddhism. It was doubts about that cardinal tenet that, we are told, incited the young Dōgen to leave the Tendai headquarters near Kyoto and to go to China in search of an answer—which came to him in the form of Caodong Chan. More recently, *hongaku* thought has been the object of violent criticism on the part of the "Critical Buddhism" movement (*hihan bukkō*). Because of its innate conservatism, its satisfaction with our brave old world, *hongaku* thought was deemed to be the source of all the evils that afflicted premodern Japanese society (and, in particular, its injustice toward outcasts). But the diametrically opposed theory, that of karmic causality, could equally lead to the same kinds of discriminatory notions and behaviors.

37. See Joseph F. Roccasalvo, "The Debate at bSam yas: A Study in Religious Contrast and Correspondence," *Philosophy East and West* 30.4 (October 1980): 511.

One aspect of Buddhist quietism and antinomianism, though rarely found in comparative discussions of quietism (and conspicuously absent from Zen belief and practice), bears a superficial resemblance to Christian devotion. There is a devotional tendency found in the cult of the Buddha Amitābha (or, in Japanese, Amida). The Japanese Pure Land schools, in particular, advocate a pure faith in Amida and total surrender to his power. While the notion of “Other Power” (*tariki*) is usually contrasted with the Zen reliance on one’s “own power” (*jiriki*), in practice these two approaches lead to similar kinds of antinomianism—the rejection of pious works and traditional cults—and it is on this ground that both the Bodhidharma school and the Pure Land schools were attacked by the Buddhist establishment.

3. Conclusion

Thus some aspects of Buddhism are comparable, but only in a vague and distant way, to aspects of the quietism advocated by Molinos, Madame Guyon, and Fénelon. Clearly, however, the “no-thought” of Chan is not the “blank slate” of Christian Quietism, on which God engraves his will and blessings. Nor does Buddhist quietism lead to the extasis of mystical union. Even in Tantric or esoteric Buddhism, where the priest becomes one with the buddhas and the gods whom he has ritually invoked, we are not dealing with extasis but with a concentration in which the self momentarily disappears.

Both Western and neo-Confucian criticisms of Buddhist quietism presuppose that the contemplative life of the Buddhist monk is negatively antisocial and leads to eccentric behavior, moral laxity, and even antinomianism. Admittedly, such elements can be found, to one degree or another, in various Buddhist trends—especially in Chan or Zen—even if they do not play the same role in Buddhism as they do in Christian Quietism. This sort of critique, however, does not do justice to Buddhism generally, and certainly not to Chinese Buddhism: the dialectic of “quiescence” and “movement” had been too integral a part of traditional Chinese thought for any religious stream (whether Buddhist, Daoist, or Confucianist) to depart significantly from it. In some cases, moreover, the charges leveled at Buddhism could be leveled at neo-Confucianism as well. The quietist tendencies of neo-Confucianism were indeed denounced by leading mainstream Confucianists such as Wang Tingxiang (1474–1544) and Yan Yuan (1635–1704).³⁸ If the neo-Confucianists tried so hard to distinguish their *jing-zuo* or “quiet sitting” from Buddhist seated meditation (*zuochan*), that is because the Buddhist and neo-Confucian practices looked, and indeed were, strikingly

38. On this question, see Jacques Gernet, *L'Intelligence de la Chine* (Paris: Gallimard, 1994), 280–302.

similar. Even Zhu Xi (1130–1200), the staunchest neo-Confucian critic of Buddhism, recognized the similarities. Still, *jingzuo* was, paradoxically, most popular among orthodox traditionalists.³⁹ Moreover, the antinomian tendencies of neo-Confucianism, in particular of the Taizhou school, resembled those of Chan Buddhism. The Taizhou scholar Li Zhi (1527–1602), for instance, rejected all external and internal constraints in the name of pure spontaneity (and died by suicide in 1602, while imprisoned).

Notwithstanding their affinities and similarities, Buddhists responded to their neo-Confucian critics by emphasizing the value of Buddhist rituals for the protection of the state and its ruler. Indeed, Buddhism was perceived by East Asian rulers mainly as an ideological weapon and only secondarily as a soteriological doctrine. In medieval Japan, Buddhist monasteries became large landholders and were actively involved in the civil wars that ravaged the country from the fourteenth century to the sixteenth. “Warrior monks” formed bands that attacked all who threatened their interests, and they had finally to be exterminated before the country could be reunified under Tokugawa rule in the seventeenth century. No one was complaining about Buddhist quietism *then*.

Monks also played a more positive social role, for instance by running hospices and leproseries, taking care of the dying, and dealing with the pollution of death through their funerary rituals. Zen monasteries were culturally and diplomatically active. Tenryūji, for instance, was the monastery in charge of trade with China, while Nanzenji, in the person of its abbot Ishin Sūden (1569–1633), acted as mediator in diplomatic relations between the *bakufu* (the military government of Japan), Ming China, and the kingdoms of Siam and Nova Hispania.⁴⁰ In reaction to the traditional image of Buddhism as an antisocial teaching, there have been attempts to delineate an “engaged Buddhism”; and since the nineteenth century, it has often become identified with emergent nationalisms. The active role of Buddhists in nationalist and ethnic causes has gone so far that in Sri Lanka, for instance, monks as well as Buddhist laymen have taken up arms.

The term *quietism* is fundamentally ambivalent and has been used to designate an “obscure object of desire” (or of aversion). While its referent seems vague and fluctuating, the experience of quietism seems a relatively constant and vital feature of varieties of mysticism. Behind the negative rhetoric, the discourse about quietism involves epistemological, soteriological, and other philosophical

39. It should be noted that meditation has never been the single paradigmatic practice of Buddhism. Many monks did not (and do not today) practice any form of meditation, perceiving it as a specialized activity, like asceticism, thaumaturgy, and scholarship. The *Biographies of Eminent Monks*, for instance, are divided into a number of rubrics, and “practitioners of meditation” is only one of them. See John Kieschnick, *The Eminent Monk: Buddhist Ideals*

in *Medieval Chinese Hagiography* (Honolulu: University of Hawai‘i Press, 1997).

40. See *Shintei Honkō kokushi nikki* (*Chronicles of National Master Honkō*), 7 vols. (Tokyo: Zoku gunsho ruijū kan-seikai, 1966–71).

issues that seem anything but obsolete. Moreover, as William James suggested, quietism is or can be a “healthy-minded” attitude toward reality. Inasmuch as quietism holds up an ideal of peaceful detachment to a time when hustle and bustle threaten individuality and individual freedom, we can only hope that it will remain—or become again—an essential component of religions like Buddhism.