

NOTES ON CHAN: PART I

THE TERM “*CHAN*” 禪

It is a contraction of the compound “*chan’na*” 禪那, which is in turn a transliteration of the Sanskrit word “*Dhyāna*,” meaning “meditation.”

In Japanese the term “Chan” is pronounced “Zen”; in Korean: “Sŏn”; in Vietnamese, “Thiền”).

Thus, Chan or Zen appears to present itself, in its very name, as a school or tradition of Buddhism which gives special emphasis to the practice of “meditation” over and above other forms of Buddhist practice.

CHAN’S CLASSICAL SELF CHARACTERIZATION IN FOUR LINES

[Note: The themes encapsulated in these 4 dicta are found in the earliest Chan literature but the actual formula is rather late. It first appears in Mu'an Shanqing's 睦庵善卿 gloss on the term “singular transmission” (*danquan* 單傳) in his *Zuting shiyüan* 祖庭事苑 (Chrestomathy from the Patriarchs' Halls, in *Zokuzōkyō/Xuzangjing* 續藏經 113:132a), a work which was not compiled until 1108.]

教外別傳 (Chn: *jiaowai biejuan* / Jpn: *kyōge betsuden*)

不立文字 (Chn: *buli wenzi* / Jpn: *furyū monji*)

直指人心 (Chn: *zhizhi renxin* / Jpn: *jikishi ninshin*)

見性成佛 (Chn: *jianxing chengfo* / Jpn: *kenshō jōbutsu*)

A special transmission outside the
[scriptural] teachings,

Does not set up (or depend upon) words
and letters,

Points directly at the human mind,

Buddhahood attained by seeing one's own
nature.

Note especially the claim of experiential “immediacy” in this classic Chan self-characterization, and its corollary claims of autonomy and superiority *vis à vis* the rest of Buddhism

A. Sixth Century Beginnings.

The age of Bodhidharma[tāra] (菩提達摩/磨[多羅] Putidamo[duoluo]) and his disciples, most notably Huike 慧可 (487-593) and Tanlin 曇林 (506-574) — all active in northern China during the late N & S Dynasties period (i.e, N. Wei, N. Qi, & N. Zhou dynasties)

Representative sources: the *Bodhidharma Anthology*, a.k.a. the *Long Scroll* (most notable therein: the *Two Entrances & Four Practices* with Tanlin's preface thereto containing a very brief biography of Bodhidharma, and the *Records*, which consist essentially in *dharma*-talks attributed to Bodhidharma).

Important themes:

The Entrance of Principle (理入 *liru*)

Wall-gazing (壁觀 *biguan*), i.e. impassability (凝住 *ningzhu*, “the coagulated state”) and *sudden* (all at once) realization, rooted in the Tathāgatarbha (*rulaizang* 如來藏) doctrine of the intrinsic buddhahood of all beings — clearly derived from the Tathāgatarbha canon, e.g., the *Śrīmālā Sūtra* (the scripture in which Tanlin specialized), and yet presented as independent of scriptures.

Realization by way of knowing (gnosis) and being.

The Entrance of Practice (行入 *xingru*)

“Requiting Injury” (*baoyuan* 報怨), “Following Conditions” (*suiyuan* 隨緣), “Non-seeking” (*wu suoqiu* 無所求), “According with the Dharma” (*chenfa* 稱法) — all of which comprise a kind of **gradual**, morally aware and morally earnest practice.

Realization by way of doing.

Note the presence, even in this earliest Chan corpus, of a fundamental tension between realization as something “always & already attained” — miraculously “given,” and only to be known or acknowledged (“mysteriously tallied with” *mingfu* 冥符) — and realization as something to be conscientiously, effortfully pursued in actual, concrete, particular, imperfect circumstances — the one more or less independent of doctrinal or scriptural study, the other deeply implicated therein.

Note also the apparent indebtedness of earliest Chan (perhaps better understood as “proto-Chan”) to the *Laṅkāvatāra Sūtra* (*Lengqie abatuoluo bao jing* 楞伽阿跋多羅寶經 — T 670) in Guṇabhadra’s 求那跋陀羅, Qiunabatuoluo, 394-468) 4 scroll translation — this being yet another text of essentially Tathāgatarbha purport.

B. The Seventh Century: Lineage Creation.

If Chan’s origins are to be found in the lives and teachings of Bodhidharma, Huike, and Tanlin then the next major

chapter in the history of its early formation is the story of the monks Daoxin 道信 (580-651) and Hongren 弘忍 (638-689). These two came later to be designated, respectively, the 4th and 5th patriarchs of Chan, but in their own times and immediately thereafter they were identified chiefly as the leading figures in what was originally a group of Buddhist ascetics known as the “East Mountain” (Dong shan 東山) community

Note: East Mountain, a.k.a. Mt. Huangmei 黃梅山 [Yellow Plum Mountain], is one of a pair of mountains known jointly as “Twin Peaks” (Shuangfeng shan 雙峰山) located in a remote region of what is today easternmost Hubei 湖北 province.

Daoxin was a monk from Henan 河南 who is said to have spent much of his early career in various monasteries in southern China (e.g., Mt. Lu 廬山, in Jiangxi 江西) acquiring a broad familiarity with a number of different Buddhist traditions. He was familiar, for example, with the *Prajñāpāramitā* (Perfection of Insight) canon — from which he drew some important themes, like “one practice *samādhi*” (*yixing sanmei* 一行三昧) — and also with Pure Land Buddhism. However, in his own teaching later in life at East Mountain he gave special emphasis to the extended and intensive practice of seated meditation, as distinct from scriptural or doctrinal study and other modes of Buddhist practice. Such emphasis on seated meditation was the chief focus also of his foremost disciple Hongren. The East Mountain community began as a small group but came soon to be famous for the rigor and authenticity of its practice and so, despite its remote location, by the seventh through

the ninth decades of the seventh century was regularly attracting large numbers of students and gaining a truly national reputation.

It is important to note the absence of any hard evidence indicating that Daoxin and Hongren saw themselves as heirs to Bodhidharma and Huike; nor is there any evidence to suggest that Daoxin had ever been a disciple of Sengcan 僧璨. Indeed, Sengcan — the so-called “third patriarch” — is essentially a cypher, a mere name in a list about whom we know nothing and who may have been virtually created later when Chan was constructing its foundation myth and needed some link between Huike and Daoxin. The identity he came later to have, including his alleged authorship of the *Xinxin ming* 信心銘 (The Believing Mind Inscription), is a later invention .

[The East Mountain community even attracted students from abroad, like the Korean Monk Pōmmang 法郎 (Chn: Falang) who has recently been proposed by Robert Buswell as possibly the true author of a famous work entitled the *Vajrasamādhi Sūtra* (*Jin'gang sanmei jing* 金剛三昧經). If Buswell's hypothesis is correct then this important text, closely related to the *Dashengqixinlun* 大乘起信論 (Mahāyāna Awakening of Faith) and thus belonging also to the Tathāgatagarbha tradition, must also be counted — together with the works in the *Bodhidharma Anthology* — as belonging to the basic archive of proto-Chan — see R. Buswell, *The Formation of Ch'an Ideology in China and Korea*, Princeton UP, 1989.]

Toward the very of the 8th century, particularly during the

reign of Empress Wu (武則天, r. 685-705), the high repute of the East Mountain community earned some of its members national recognition, high official honors, and valuable court patronage. Thus it was that the monk Shenxiu 神秀 (606?-706), one of Hongren's foremost students, was invited to the capitals (Chang'an 長安 & Luoyang 洛陽) in the year 700 to receive the personal veneration of the empress and to be installed as a leading metropolitan prelate. At the beginning of the 8th century Shenxiu surely ranked as one of the most esteemed and influential monks in China. His teachings, recorded in some of the texts discovered in the Dunhuang archives, reflect fidelity to the heritage of Daoxin and Hongren but also some influence from Huayan 華嚴 Buddhism (an important ingredient of which was the *tathāgatagarbha* 如來藏 doctrine) and from Tiantai 天台.

The next chapter in this story of the formation of a “Chan School” story in the year 732. On January 15 of that year the monk Heze Shenhui 荷澤神會 (670-762), then in his 62nd year, addressed a large group of monks and laymen assembled at the Dayun si 大雲寺 (Great Cloud Monastery) in the town of Huatai 滑臺 located just northeast of the secondary Tang capital of Luoyang 洛陽 (Honan Province). His sermon was recorded by a lay disciple presumably present at the assembly and has been preserved for us among the Dunhuang manuscripts under the title, *Putidamo nanzong ding shifei lun* 菩提達磨南宗定非是論 (Treatise Establishing What is True and What is False in the Southern Lineage of Bodhidharma).

This sermon was a bombshell — a deliberately provocative and quite harshly worded challenge to the Chan establishment

of the day. Shenhui claimed nothing less than that the current Chan establishment — consisting chiefly of disciples of the then so-called “Sixth Patriarch,” Shenxiu — was illegitimate and that its teachings were heresies that had profoundly distorted Bodhidharma’s “special transmission.”

Now in his own day, I repeat, Shenxiu was regarded as the true and foremost successor of Hongren, i.e., as genuine the Sixth Patriarch. When he arrived in Luoyang in 676, having earlier left the “Eastern Mountain” community of his teacher Hongren, he quickly gained great fame and generous imperial support. For the next 30 years, until his death in 706, he enjoyed the status of one of China’s most revered and influential Buddhist monks. His personal success as a prelate meant, in effect, a significant transformation in the character, or at least the public image, of Chan. What had been a relatively obscure, “provincial” community of monks who stressed meditation and experience above all other components of Buddhism, and who stood apart from the then ecclesiastically dominant traditions of learned Buddhism, became itself a stanchion of the metropolitan Buddhist establishment.

Shenhui’s bold claim (or outrageous presumption, depending on one’s point of view) was that Shenxiu was not the true “Sixth Patriarch.” Rather, he said, that honor belong to his own (i.e., Shenhui’s) teacher, a thitherto obscure monk named Huineng 慧能 (638-713). Huineng, Shenhui asserted, had been secretly chosen by Hongren as the latter’s true heir after showing himself to be spiritually superior to the heir-presumptive, Shenxiu. After receiving the secret transmission (marked by the gift of Hongren’s robe and begging-bowl,

which had been passed down from Bodhidharma), he then immediately left East Mountain and traveled south, to the region of Canton from which he had originally hailed, to preside over the Baolin si 寶林寺 (Monastery of the Grove of Treasures) in the district of Caoxi (Caoqi) 曹溪. There, Shenhui further claimed, Huineng kept alive the true heritage of Bodhidharma, and there Shenhui studied with him. One should note especially that in asserting that Huineng was the true Sixth Patriarch Shenhui was in effect also claiming that he himself was the Seventh Patriarch.

Shenhui called Huineng's and his own Chan lineage the "Southern School." Shenxiu's teaching and successors he dubbed the "Northern School." (Note: this was Shenhui's terminology; his opponents did not use such labels.)

In his incendiary sermon Shenhui made essentially two kinds of claims against the so-called "Northern School." First, he made what we might call ecclesiological argument, an argument concerning churchly authority — viz., the argument that Shenxiu and his successors had usurped the patriarchal succession, that they had not really been chosen by Hongren as his true heirs. Secondly, he made a doctrinal claim — that the Northern School had fundamentally and disastrously misunderstood the nature of meditation or Chan practice. The Northern School, he said, conceived of meditation as a *MEANS* of mental purification whereby one could *GRADUALLY* (*jian* 漸) achieve the *GOAL* of enlightenment. But this, he said, was not what Bodhidharma and his true successors such as Huineng had actually taught. Rather, the true patriarchs held that the very distinction between *MEANS* and *GOAL* is itself a product of the ignorant, discriminating

human intellect, that true meditation is not mere mind-craft, and that enlightenment comes only **SUDDENLY** (*dun* 頓), when one has had an all-at-once insight into the true nature of oneself and of all things.

Modern research, based on the Dunhuang Chan manuscripts, demonstrates that the image of Shenxiu and the “Northern School” which Shenhui constructed was largely a straw-man. Shenxiu and his disciples, for example, in fact also advocated sudden enlightenment. Nevertheless, in time, Shenhui’s straw-men and his claims against them were accepted. Huineng would come to be regarded as the true Sixth Patriarch. His “Southern School” would come to be regarded as orthodox Zen, and the so-called “Northern School,” ever after condemned as “gradualist,” would pass into oblivion.

The classical version of this tale is told in a text known as the *Liuzu tanjing* 六祖壇經 (The Platform Scripture of the Sixth Patriarch), a work which took shape around the year 780, i.e., several decades after Shenhui launched his attack. It has a complicated history, but for our purposes it is especially important as a canonization of Shenhui’s claims.

Shenxiu’s poem:

身是菩提樹 心如明鏡臺 時時勤佛拭 莫使有塵埃

shen shi puti shu

xin ru mingjing tai

shishi qin fushi

mo shi you zhenai

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 dust collect upon it.

Shenhui's poem:

菩提本無樹 明鏡亦無臺 佛性常清淨 何處有塵埃

puti ben wu shu

mingjing yi wu tai

foxing chang qingjing

hechu you chenai

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

C. The Emergence of “Classical Chan.”

What may properly be called “classical” Chan, as distinguished from early or proto- Chan, begins with what is labelled the “third generation” after Huineng — specifically with Mazu Daoyi (馬祖道一, 709-788) and Shitou Xiqian (石頭希遷, 700-790). It was these two teachers, in fact, who generated all the major lines of Chan that were to flourish during the Five Dynasties, Song, and later periods in China — as well as all the major lines of Sōn in medieval and later Korea and all the forms of Zen found in medieval and later Japan.

Thus, of the so-called “Five Houses” of classical Chan the houses of Guiyang (潯仰) and Linji (臨濟) descended from Mazu, whereas the houses of Caodong (曹洞), Yunmen (雲門), and Fayen (法眼) derived from Shitou Xiqian. By the time of the transition from N. Song to S. Song (i.e., by around the first quarter of the 12th century) three of these five houses had withered or been absorbed by the others and

only Caodong (Jpn: Sōtō) and Linji (Jpn: Rinzai) continued to develop, each producing several sub-lineages of its own.

In all of this, however, it is important to note that both Mazu and Shitou seem actually to have had only the most tenuous connections with Huineng. Their work may have been more in the nature of creation than of transmission. To be sure, each was said to have been a disciple of a disciple of Huineng but the intervening figures in both lines — Qingyuan Xingsi (青原行思, 660?-740?) in Shitou's case and Nanyue Huairang (南嶽懷讓, 677?-744?) in Mazu's — are really very obscure individuals about whom virtually nothing is known. Thus, it may well be that descent from Huineng was not so much a fact as it was an ideological claim asserted by Mazu, Shitou, and their heirs in an effort to appropriate or create for themselves a venerable and congenial heritage. That is to say, despite all the “lineage rhetoric” of the later Chan tradition, the discontinuities between classical Mazu/Shitou Chan and the proto-Chan traditions of Shenhui, Shenxiu, Hongren, Daoxin, and Bodhidharma may well outweigh any continuities.

Ironically, although it was Shenhui who was most responsible for the exaltation of Huineng as “sixth patriarch,” his “Heze” lineage was itself quickly overshadowed by Mazu's and Shitou's lines and died out after only a few generations. Its last major representative, Guifeng Zongmi (桂峰宗密, 780-841), was actually quite hostile to the sorts of Chan fostered by Mazu and Shitou. However Zongmi's judgments, forcefully expressed in the surviving *General Preface* (都序 *Duxu*) to his inextant *Chan Anthology* (禪源諸詮集 *Chanyuan zhuquan ji* — literally, *Collection of Various Discourses from the Fonts of Chan*), were not honored by later history.