

## The Buddhism of the Cultured Elite

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The Buddhist monk and scholar Zongmi (780–841) played an important role in the development of two of the major traditions of medieval Chinese Buddhism, Huayan and Chan, being honored as a “patriarch” in each. His writings are thus often portrayed as representing a blending of Huayan theory with Chan practice. Huayan was one of the principal scholastic traditions that developed during the Tang dynasty (618–907). It claimed that its teachings were based on the mystical vision of the infinite interpenetration of all things that the Buddha realized during his enlightenment as revealed in the *Huayan* (or *Avatamsaka*) *Sūtra*, from which it took its name and spiritual warrant. Chan (or Zen) began to emerge as a self-conscious tradition at the end of the seventh century. Rejecting scriptural authority, it claimed to be based on a historical transmission of the Buddha’s enlightened understanding down through an unbroken lineage of patriarchs.

Zongmi lived and wrote during a time when a number of radical movements were gaining currency within Chinese Chan. The iconoclastic rhetoric of these traditions could easily be misinterpreted in antinomian ways that denied the need for spiritual cultivation and moral discipline. Having grown up and received his early Chan training in Sichuan, an area in which the most extreme of these movements flourished in the late eighth and early ninth centuries, Zongmi was particularly sensitive to such ethical dangers. He accordingly adapted Huayan metaphysics as a buttress against the antinomian implications of these radical interpretations of Chan teachings.

In using Huayan to articulate the ontological basis and philosophical rationale for Chan practice, however, Zongmi also redirected the thrust of some of the central Huayan teachings. Most importantly, he shifted emphasis away from the *Huayan Sūtra* to the *Awakening of Faith in Mahāyāna* (*Dasheng qixin lun*). Although the Chinese tradition ascribes the *Awakening of Faith* to Aśvaghōṣa, modern scholarship has shown that it was not a translation of a work by that venerable Indian master but that it was instead an apocryphal text composed in Chinese during the third quarter of the sixth century. By extending the Indian Buddhist doctrine

of the *tathāgatagarbha* (womb or embryo of the Tathāgata) to claim that all sentient beings are intrinsically enlightened to begin with, this treatise became the cornerstone for East Asian Buddhist theory and practice. In addition to offering an ontology that locates enlightenment within the original nature of all human beings, the *Awakening of Faith* also provides an explanation for how the process of delusion arises and perpetuates itself. Zongmi was thus able to use this text to furnish a cosmogony that he made serve as a map for Buddhist practice.

The two works translated below, Zongmi's *Response to a Question from Wen Zao* (*Da Wen Shangshu suowen*) and his *Response to Ten Questions from Shi Shanren* (*Da Shi Shanren shiwen*), are typical of the learned discourse that transpired between Zongmi and his literati disciples. Both exchanges reiterate a number of the major themes amplified in Zongmi's longer and more famous works, such as his *Inquiry into the Origin of Humanity* (*Yuanrenlun*) and *Preface to the Collected Writings on the Source of Chan* (*Chanyuan zhuquanji duxu*), as well as reveal some of the central issues that Chinese Buddhists debated in the second half of the eighth and first half of the ninth centuries.

Zongmi's response to Wen Zao was probably written sometime between 828 and 835 and was subsequently included in his *Collected Correspondence with Laity and Clergy* (*Daosu chouda wenji*), compiled by his disciples shortly after his death in 841. Wen Zao (767–836) was one of Zongmi's most prominent lay disciples. He was connected to the imperial line through marriage, and his devoted service to the Tang cause while on the staff of various provincial governors eventually earned him a prestigious appointment in the central government as minister in charge of the Board of Rites. Zongmi's response to Wen Zao answers his question about the fate of the enlightened person after death. Zongmi appended a short verse to his original letter and later, in response to a further entreaty from Wen Zao, added his own explanatory note to his essay and verse (the latter of which is not translated below). Here and elsewhere, Zongmi insisted that an initial experience of enlightenment did not obviate the need for further religious effort but had to be followed by an often protracted regimen of spiritual practice so that it could be thoroughly integrated into all of one's activities. Sudden enlightenment is made possible by the teaching that an intrinsically enlightened mind is inherent in all beings; the subsequent gradual cultivation is necessitated by the persistence of the habitual residue of past conditioning. As his explanatory note reveals, Zongmi's theory of sudden enlightenment followed by gradual cultivation is based on his understanding of the *Awakening of Faith*.

The second text, Zongmi's *Response to Ten Questions from Shi Shanren*, records an exchange that took place in 824. Each of Shi Shanren's questions and Zongmi's answers was originally composed as a separate letter; all ten were then collected together and subsequently included in Zongmi's *Collected Correspondence with Laity and Clergy*. Nothing is known about Shi Shanren, although both his name, Shanren ("mountain man"), and his historical obscurity suggest that he was a lay recluse, perhaps living in seclusion on Mount Zhongnan, the mountain where Zongmi passed much of the last two decades of his life. The sophistication of Shi

Shanren's questions indicates that he was a member of the cultured elite, and the ten questions and answers are characteristic of the learned discourse that Zongmi and his literati disciples engaged in.

The exchange is important for revealing some of the central issues that Chinese Buddhists debated in the eighth and early part of the ninth centuries. It begins with a discussion of the nature of the Way (*dao*), a term that here means both enlightenment and the path by which it is realized. If the Way is unconditioned, then the question naturally arises of how it could be achieved by practice, which is based on cause and effect and thus falls within the realm of the conditioned. How could a conditioned practice bring about an unconditioned result? This question had direct bearing on the nature of religious practice, and in the eighth century it was given paradigmatic expression in the sudden/gradual controversy.

The sudden/gradual controversy enfolded a complex set of issues, and the terms were used variously by different partisans in the debate. One of the primary meanings of "sudden" was direct or unmediated. The sudden teaching was thus the teaching in which the truth was revealed immediately without recourse to any expedients as exemplified by the *Huayan Sūtra*, in which the Buddha was believed to have fully revealed the content of his enlightenment without making any concessions to the limited ability of his audience to comprehend its meaning. In the gradual teaching, by contrast, the truth was mediated by expedient means (*upāya*) to make it accessible to the limited abilities of the Buddha's followers. Since many Chinese Buddhists regarded truth as a single, unitary principle, a further connotation of "sudden" was that truth could only be grasped all at once in its entirety—enlightenment, therefore, could only occur suddenly. Gradualists, on the other hand, assumed that enlightenment admitted of degrees, or at least that it could be approached in a graduated series of stages. In the *Platform Sūtra of the Sixth Patriarch*, which expressed the orthodox position for the later Chan tradition, gradualists were criticized for teaching that meditation practice was a means for attaining enlightenment. Subitists, however, held that there could be no duality between meditation and enlightenment. One way in which the two positions were often reconciled was to claim that they represented opposing, but interrelated, perspectives on practice and enlightenment: whereas the gradual position looked at practice from the point of view of the unenlightened, the sudden position looked at practice from the point of view of the enlightened. Thus the sudden position was often associated with ultimate truth (*paramārtha-satya*), and the gradual position, with conventional truth (*saṃvṛti-satya*). As a further corollary, the sudden teaching was frequently said to be appropriate for beings of the highest capacity, whereas the gradual teaching was appropriate for everyone else.

The *Platform Sūtra of the Sixth Patriarch* represented the sudden/gradual debate as the cause for a fundamental split that occurred within the Chan tradition during the eighth century, dividing the so-called northern line from the so-called southern line. Thus the southern line of Huineng (638–713) and Shenhui (684–758), which emerged as the orthodox tradition, claimed the ideological high ground over the northern line, which it pictured as espousing a gradualistic, and hence

inferior, approach to enlightenment. In this way the sudden/gradual issue was related to the question of lineage, the subject of Shi Shanren's ninth question. Standing within the southern lineage of Shenhui, Zongmi was committed to upholding the sudden position but (as seen in his response to Wen Zao) moderated its radical implications by insisting that sudden enlightenment had to be followed by gradual practice.

Both Zongmi's *Response to a Question from Wen Zao* and *Response to Ten Questions from Shi Shanren* are appended to his biography in the *Transmission of the Flame Compiled during the Jingde Period* (*Jingde chuandeng lu*), compiled by Daoyuan in 1004 and published in the Taishō Tripitaka, vol. 51, pp. 307b3–308b16. A slightly different version of both exchanges appears in a manuscript discovered at Shinpuku-ji in Japan and published by Ishii Shūdō in *Zengaku kenkyū* 60 (1981):98–104. Zongmi's *Response to Ten Questions from Shi Shanren* is also appended to his biography in fascicle 6 of the *Chodang chip*, compiled in 952.

### Further Reading

For a study of Zongmi's life and thought, see Peter N. Gregory, *Tsung-mi and the Sinification of Buddhism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991); see also Gregory, *Inquiry into the Origin of Humanity: An Annotated Translation of Tsung-mi's Yüan jen lun with a Modern Commentary* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1995).

### Response to a Question from Wen Zao (Da Wen Shangshu suowen)

[Wen Zao's question:] If one who has realized the truth and cut off delusion is not bound by karma, then what does his numinous nature depend on after his life has come to an end?

[Zongmi's reply:] There is not a single sentient being that is not fully endowed with an enlightened nature, which is numinous, bright, empty, and tranquil and which is no different from the Buddha. It is only because for aeons without beginning [sentient beings] have never realized it but have deludedly clung to their bodily existence as their selves that they give rise to feelings such as attraction and aversion and, in accord with those feelings, generate karma. Receiving retribution in accord with their karma, they experience birth, sickness, old age, and death and prolong the aeons in which they transmigrate.

Thus the enlightened nature within our bodily existence never is born nor dies. [Its presence within deluded beings] is like dreaming one is being driven away while one is safe at home. Or it is like water: although it turns to ice, its wet nature does not change. If one is able to realize that this very nature is the

dharma body, which from the beginning is unborn, then how could there be anything to depend on? [This nature] is our numinous, unobscured, clear, and bright ever-present awareness. There is nowhere from which it comes and nowhere to which it goes.

Since over many lifetimes deluded attachments have become second nature, the subtle effects of delight, anger, grief, and joy continue to flow on so that even though the true principle is penetrated all at once, it is difficult to cut off these feelings suddenly. One must methodically become aware of them over a long time so as to reduce them and further reduce them [until there are none left]. [This process] is like the wind: although it suddenly ceases, the waves [it has stirred into motion] only gradually subside. How could the cultivation of a single lifetime equal the activity of the buddhas? Just take empty tranquility to be the self-essence. Do not acknowledge your physical body [as your self] but take your numinous awareness as your own mind. Do not acknowledge deluded thoughts [as real]; whenever deluded thoughts arise, do not follow any of them. Then at the time of death your karma will naturally not be able to bind you, and you may resort to the heavenly or human realms as you wish. If thoughts of attraction and aversion have been eliminated, then you will not receive a predestined bodily existence and will be able to alter the length of your life and physical appearance. When the flow of the subtle effects is altogether extinguished and just the great wisdom of perfect enlightenment shines forth alone, then, according to circumstances, you will be able to manifest billions of bodily forms to save sentient beings caught in conditions—that is what is meant by buddhahood.

[Zongmi's explanatory note:] Aśvaghōṣa bodhisattva gathered together the hundred books of the great vehicle and condensed their essential message in writing the *Awakening of Faith in Mahāyāna*. His treatise establishes the cardinal principle, explaining that the mind of all sentient beings has an enlightened and unenlightened aspect. Within the enlightened [aspect] there is also an intrinsically enlightened aspect and an experientially enlightened aspect. Even though what I wrote above was phrased in terms of illuminating the truth and contemplating the mind, its meaning is the same as [Aśvaghōṣa's] treatise. From the beginning to "no different from the Buddha" corresponds to intrinsic enlightenment. From "it is only because for aeons without beginning" corresponds to unenlightenment. From "if one is able to realize" corresponds to experiential enlightenment. Within experiential enlightenment there are also sudden enlightenment and gradual cultivation. From here ["if one is able to realize"] to "nowhere to which it goes" corresponds to sudden enlightenment. From "since over many lifetimes deluded attachments" corresponds to gradual cultivation. Within gradual cultivation from the time when one first generates the thought of enlightenment until one attains buddhahood there are three levels of freedom. From "you may resort [to the heavenly or human realms] as you wish" corresponds to freedom in receiving existence. From "if thoughts of attraction and aversion [have been eliminated]" corresponds to freedom in

transformation. From “when the flow of the subtle effects [is altogether extinguished]” corresponds to ultimate freedom. Finally, from “just take empty tranquility as the self-essence” to “your karma will naturally not be able to bind you” truly is the way one who has realized the truth puts his mind into practice from dawn to dusk and corresponds to the essentials of the cultivation of calming and contemplation. (Zongmi’s poem:)

Doing what is right is the awakened mind;  
 Doing what is wrong is the unruly mind.  
 The unruly [mind] follows affective thoughts—when you meet your end you  
 will be pulled by your karma.  
 The awakened [mind] does not follow feelings—when you meet your end you  
 will be able to transform your karma.

#### Response to Ten Questions from Shi Shanren (Da Shi Shanren shiwen)

Q: What is the Way, and how is it cultivated? Must it be cultivated to be completed, or does it not depend on effort?

A: Being unobstructed is the Way; enlightening delusion is cultivation. Even though the Way is originally perfect, delusion arises, and [beings] become bound. When deluded thoughts are entirely exhausted, cultivation is complete.

Q: If the Way depends on cultivation to be completed, then it is conditioned and is the same as mundane dharmas, which are false and not true. If, being completed, it once again falls into decline, then how can it be called supermundane?

A: What is conditioned is tied up with karma and is called false and mundane. What is unconditioned is the practice of cultivation and is true and supermundane.

Q: Is the process of cultivation sudden or gradual? If it is gradual, then, in forgetting the past and letting go of the future, how are [past and future] brought together and completed? If it is sudden, then how can the myriad practices and numerous means be consummated at one time?

A: As soon as the true principle is realized, it is suddenly perfect, but the process of completely eliminating deluded feelings occurs gradually. Being suddenly perfect is like a newborn babe: in one day its limbs and body are completely intact. Gradual cultivation is like rearing, nurturing, and bringing a person to adulthood: only after many years does his personality become formed.

Q: In the cultivation of the teaching of the mind ground, does the realization of the mind take place all at once or is there a further practice to be undertaken? If there is a further practice, why is it called the sudden purport of the southern

lineage? If on realization a person is the same as all buddhas, why does one not emit spiritually pervading light?

A: When you recognize that a frozen pond consists entirely of water, [you understand that] it will melt by means of the sun's heat; when you realize that the ordinary person is true reality, you will cultivate yourself assisted by the power of the dharma. When ice melts, water flows freely, immediately releasing its benefits of washing [impurities] away. When delusions are exhausted, the spiritual energy of the mind pervades [everywhere], and one for the first time emits the response of pervading light. There is no further practice beyond cultivating the mind.

Q: If one attains buddhahood only by cultivating one's mind, then why do various scriptures also preach that it is necessary to adorn buddha-lands and teach other beings and that only [fulfilling such practices] is what it means to complete the Way?

A: When a mirror is bright, it reflects images in thousands of variations; when the mind is pure, it spiritually pervades in myriads of responses. Reflected images represent adorning buddhalands; spiritually pervading means teaching other beings. The adornment is at once [adornment] and not adornment; the reflected images are both form and not form.

Q: The scriptures all preach liberating living beings and that, furthermore, living beings are not living beings. Why, then, should we strive to liberate them?

A: To truly liberate living beings takes effort. You have just said that they are not living beings; why did you not add that they are [both] liberated and not liberated?

Q: Some scriptures say that the Buddha is eternal, whereas others say that he passed into nirvāṇa. If he is eternal, then he is not deceased; if he is deceased, then he is not eternal. Is not there a contradiction here?

A: [Those who] transcend all phenomenal appearances are called buddhas—how could there be any reality to their appearing in the world and entering nirvāṇa? Manifesting his appearance and disappearance is a matter of exigency. In response to exigencies, he appears under the bodhi tree; when those exigencies have been completely met, he passes into nirvāṇa between the sāla trees. The mindlessness of clear water offers an analogy: there is no image that is not reflected in it. But images are not real existents, so how could the going and coming of external things be? Phenomenal appearances are not the Buddha's body, so how could the appearance and disappearance of the Tathāgata be?

Q: How is the Buddha born through transformation? Is it like my being reborn? Given that the Buddha is without birth, what meaning could birth have? If you say that dharmas are born when mind is born and that dharmas are extinguished when mind is extinguished, then how can the acceptance of the nonbirth of dharmas (*anutpattikadharmakṣānti*) be attained?

A: You just spoke of transformation. Since transformation is itself empty and

emptiness is without birth, what need is there to inquire into the meaning of birth? When birth and death have been extinguished, tranquil extinction is true reality. Accepting that this dharma is without birth is what is called the acceptance of the nonbirth of dharmas.

Q: Buddhas complete the Way and preach the dharma solely for the sake of liberating living beings. Since living beings have six paths [of existence], why did the Buddha only manifest himself within the human [path]? Again, after the Buddha's demise, the dharma was passed down through a mind-to-mind transmission from Kāśyapa down to the seven Chinese patriarchs, and in each generation [the dharma] was only transmitted to a single person. Since you have said that all living beings without exception attain the stage of "the one son" (a phrase generally referring to buddhahood, where everyone is equally valued as one's only son, but here used by Shi Shanren with the further connotation of "sole heir"), why was the transmission not to everyone?

A: Although the sun and moon traverse the heavens, illuminating all directions, the blind do not see them. Shrouded in darkness, they do not know that it is not the sun and moon that do not reach everywhere; the fault lies in their [vision] being obscured. The case of the meaning of liberating and not liberating is like this. It is not that [out of the six paths] humans and gods were chosen over [hungry] ghosts and beasts. It is because only human beings are able to accumulate [experience] and pass it on [to successive generations] without interruption that we know that the Buddha appeared among humans. After his death, he entrusted [the dharma] to Kāśyapa, and the succession of one person [in each generation] continued in turn. Furthermore, it is like the principle of patrilineal organization in the present age: a country surely does not have two kings. It is not that those who are liberated are limited to that number.

Q: On what basis does one give rise to the thought of enlightenment (*bodhi-citta*), and in emulation of what dharma does one renounce the world? Now, how should practice be cultivated, and how does one experience the taste of the dharma? What level will practice attain to? Should one abide in mind, or should one cultivate mind? If one abides in mind, that hinders the cultivation of mind; but if one cultivates mind, when thoughts stir one is not settled—how can that be called mastering the Way? If one settles the mind in a single meditative practice (*samādhi*), how does that differ from [what is practiced by] the adepts of meditation? I pray that you will be moved by your great compassion to explain each [of these matters] in turn for me in accord with the truth.

A: Giving rise to the thought of enlightenment involves mastering that the four great elements [of earth, water, fire, and wind] are as [unreal as] something conjured; penetrating that the six sense objects are as [illusory as] flowers in the sky; realizing that one's own mind is the mind of Buddha; and seeing that [one's] original nature is the dharma nature. Understanding that the mind does not abide is itself the practice of cultivation. That it does not abide and



yet is aware is the taste of the dharma. If one clings to dharmas, that is stirring thoughts into motion, which is thus like when someone is shut in darkness, there is nothing that can be seen. Now if one does not abide [in anything], there is no defilement or clinging, which is thus like someone with eyes who, when he comes into the full light of the sun, sees the multitudinous dharmas. How could that be [like what is realized by] adepts of meditation? When there is no clinging, how can one talk about a level to be attained?