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“No-Thought” in Pao-T’ang Ch’an and Early Ati-Yoga

by *A.W. Hanson-Barber*

The notion of no-thought is found in both the Pao-T’ang school of Ch’an¹ and the early Ati-Yoga system² now preserved in the Nyingma school of Tibetan Buddhism.³ Some authors have stated that Ch’an thought and the Ati-Yoga thought are, in fact, the same in many aspects. Some have even suggested that the Ati-Yoga has incorporated Ch’an at an early stage of its development or implied that the Ati-Yoga is a tantricized form of Ch’an.⁴ It would seem likely that in part these authors have formulated their theories based on the fact that the notion of no-thought appears in both schools. However, as will be seen below, the notion of no-thought has a completely different connotation for these two schools of thought.

There is good reason here to select the Pao-T’ang school from among the various schools of Ch’an. Primarily, a strong argument could be made that the now infamous Hwa Shang Mahāyāna (the representative of the Ch’an school at the debate of bSam yas or Lhasa) was at least in part a representative of this school, especially in his theory of no-thought. This argument is not only based on the information gathered from the undoubtedly exaggerated Tibetan sources about the council, but also is available from Chinese sources found at Tun Huang.⁵ Therefore, it seems likely that if there were any connection between Hwa shang’s thought and the notion of no-thought in Ch’an, it would be with the more radical version of this notion found in the Pao-T’ang school. The Tibetans had easy access to this school and it had obviously become popular enough for one of its spokesmen to have been chosen for the debate.

In this brief paper, I will present a description of both the actual doctrinal position that the Pao-T'ang school took on the notion of no-thought and how this position developed within the Ch'an school. Secondly, I will present a description of the doctrinal position of this same notion as found in the early Ati-Yoga. However, a history of its development within that school is at present not possible to reconstruct, due to a lack of any critical study based on the material available.

1. The Development of the Notion of No-Thought in China

According to Whalen W. Lai,⁶ the notion of no-thought (Ch. *wu-nien*) cannot be separated from the *nien* complex found in the Han tradition. He has argued that the notion of no-thought can be used to determine the origin of *The Awakening of Faith in the Mahāyāna*, the first Buddhist work wherein one encounters the notion of no-thought. However, the notion of no-thought and its exact meaning within this work are problematic; not only is an English rendering difficult, but the notion is difficult to contend with even for the alleged translation made by Śikṣānanda.

Be that as it may, within the Ch'an tradition one first finds the notion of no-thought being put forth by the Southern school to counter the notion of "detachment from thought" (Ch. *li-nien*) of the Northern school. The very use of the term no-thought is even found in the *Platform Sutra of the Sixth Patriarch*. One can surmise it was one of the key issues that divided the two branches of Ch'an. Whether or not the Southern school understood correctly the implications of *li-nien* is still undetermined.⁷ Although this question is important to Buddhologists, the Southern school did finally gain the hearts of the Chinese, as Suzuki has noted:

... as time went on (the Southern school) proved to be the winner as being in better accord with the thought and psychology of the Chinese people.⁸

From this beginning, Wu Chu, one of the founders of the Pao-T'ang school, developed the notion of no-thought to its radical, although logical, conclusion. The notion put forth by

Wu Chu can be found in the *Li Tai Fa Pao Chi*,⁹ a document found at Tun-Huang.

II. The Ch'an Doctrine of No-Thought

The notion of no-thought has to be seen within a context of philosophical notions before the fuller implications of its meaning can be ascertained. This context consists of three parts: 1) definition of enlightenment; 2) sudden enlightenment; and 3) the notion of no-thought proper.

As is well known, the Ch'an school, basing itself on the statements in the *Lañkāvatāra Sūtra* and elsewhere, basically defines enlightenment as *sva-citta*. As Hui Neng explains:

To know our mind is to obtain liberation. To obtain liberation is to attain Samadhi of Prajna, which is “thoughtlessness.” What is “thoughtlessness?” “Thoughtlessness” is to see and to know all Dharmas (things) with the mind free from attachment. When in use it pervades everywhere, and yet it sticks nowhere. What we have to do is to purify our mind so that the six gates will neither be defiled by nor attached to the six sense-objects. When our mind works freely without any hindrance, and is at liberty to “come” or to “go,” we attain Samadhi of Prajna or liberation.¹⁰

Thus, as will be seen below, this position of defining enlightenment as *sva-citta* is necessarily implied in the philosophical position of the Pao-T'ang school. Therefore, there is no difference between the Southern school and the Pao-T'ang school on this point and the above statement by Hui Neng would be accepted by the Pao-T'ang.

As for point three above, one can ascertain Wu Chu's position on this from a statement in the *Li Tai Fa Pao Chi*: “When there is truly no-thought, then no-thought itself does not exist.”¹¹ By this is meant that when there really is no discrimination, then one can not even speak of a thing called no discrimination. This is further elaborated by a criticism brought against this school by Tsung Mi:

... Their idea is that the cycle of birth and death is due to the arising of thought (*ch'i hsin*^a): when thought arises there is delu-

sion (*wang*^b); when no thought, either good or evil, arises there is truth.¹²

He further goes on to criticize the Pao-T'ang along the same lines that Hwa Shang Mahāyāna was criticized in Tibet. Finally, he concludes:

Thus, their practice is not (concerned with) right or wrong, but only values no mind (*wu hsin*^c) as the profound ultimate (*miao chi*^d)¹³

Further, as noted above, there is no way to understand the implication of the Pao-T'ang position other than within the stream of sudden enlightenment. That is, when the discriminations have been completely stopped, enlightenment must come suddenly. This is further corroborated by the criticisms brought against this school by Shen Sh'ing in the *Pei Shan Lu*.¹⁴

Therefore, the notion of no-thought is seen as the goal. When one can stay within the realm of no-thought without straying from it, one has arrived. This can also be ascertained from the unusual practices of the Pao-T'ang. They did not make offerings to the Buddhas, practice compassionate activity, follow even the standard etiquette of the time, or have the standard ceremonies of ordination of monks and nuns. All of these customs were seen to be nothing more than discriminations and therefore on the side of *samsāra*.

Thus, it has been shown that the Pao-T'ang school understood enlightenment as *sva-citta*, accepted the theory of sudden enlightenment, and saw no-thought as the goal.

III. No-Thought in the Ati-Yoga

As mentioned above, a history of the development of the notion of no-thought in the Ati-Yoga is at present impossible. This is primarily because most of the materials for a critical study have only become available to the West in the past few years and as of yet no one has intensively studied the earliest material of this system. A study of such material is, of course, crucial for the history and doctrine of the rather cloudy early

tantric period. However, lacking this, I have presented below material drawn from the individual perhaps most responsible for the transmission of Ati-Yoga to Tibet: Śrī Siṃha, who was the teacher of both Vairocana and Vimalamitra, who in turn transmitted the Ati-Yoga system that they learned from Śrī Siṃha into Tibet during the first propagation period.

For this paper, I have drawn on the teachings of Śrī Siṃha that were translated into Tibetan by Vairocana. In this section of the investigation I again will use the three categories mentioned above to try to gain a comprehensive understanding of the notion of no-thought in the Ati-Yoga system.

IV. Definition of Enlightenment in Ati-Yoga

Unlike the Ch’an school position on the definition of enlightenment presented above, the Ati-Yoga position is that enlightenment is defined as *bodhicitta*. This is understood within the general context of the tantras; the multi-level meaning of *bodhicitta* found within the tantric literature is accepted by this school *in toto*. Here, then, is the Ati-Yoga school’s understanding of enlightenment as *bodhicitta* and then its understanding of what *bodhicitta* means:

The Bhagavan arose from the midst of his profound meditation without appearances (i.e., thought constructs), and spoke: “The supreme vehicle, which is peerless, by whatever mounting on this great vehicle [that one undertakes] one certainly arises from saṃsāra. Since [saṃsāra] is the place [wherein one] depends upon other vehicles, it is proper to meditate upon this [supreme] vehicle. Whoever meditates on this great vehicle is similar to the Jina-Buddhas. Since the great vehicle is *bodhicitta*. . . .¹⁵

. . . from all the spheres of the complete pure ocean [like] skywomb which is the completely pure *bodhicitta* *thig le* of all appearances there arises that very pure awareness from that sphere . . . From both the pure awareness and the sphere one realizes (that) characteristics and characteristiclessness are identical. Since meat, religious articles, and the maṇḍala of the gods and goddesses are realized as not being separate (from the non-dual pure awareness sphere), it is Anuyoga.¹⁶

Thus, enlightenment is understood in Ati-Yoga as *bodhicitta*. In the second quotation what is being presented is an explanation of how to understand the Anuyoga tantric level from the Ati-Yoga perspective. This is an interesting feature of this system that needs further investigation; however, here what must be pointed out is that the quotation does show that the understanding of *bodhicitta* is within the usual context of the tantras.

V. Sudden Enlightenment in Ati-Yoga

Within the Ati-Yoga system, enlightenment is seen as occurring in an instant. This is so because the non-attraction to or non-aversion from thoughts can only happen suddenly. That is when one neither tries to stop or start thoughts, but rests in the state of pure awareness (Tb. *rig pa*); the act of attachment to or aversion from thoughts is stopped in an instant. There is no middle ground; either one is in the mode of attachment/aversion or one is not. In the *Root Tantra Without Birth Being the Great Sky Like Vajrasattva*, it says:

As for fulfilling the conditioned minds of all sentient beings, because of persevering, one is called brave; the body of all Tathāgatas manifests from the five-bodhi meditation; not by stages but in an instant. In an instant (one becomes) the son of a good family (i.e., a Bodhisattva).¹⁷

The term that is here rendered as “instant” (Tb. *cig car*) has been brought into question by R.A. Stein. He has maintained that the Tibetan should be understood as “simultaneous” and not “instantaneous.”¹⁸ However, the material that he was using was primarily from the Mahāmudra teachings and does not apply to the Ati-Yoga system. This is so because of the fact that in the texts investigated, the sudden break-through is more often spoken of as “spontaneously arisen” (Tb. *lhun grub*) or “existing spontaneously arisen” (Tb. *lhun gyis grub pa yin*) instead of “instantaneous” (Tb. *cig car*). Therefore, the Tibetan term *cig car* should be translated in this material as “instantaneous,” and the comments that Professor Stein has given on this term do not apply in this case.

Be that as it may, one must then read the terms “spontaneous arising” and “existing spontaneously arisen” as synonymous with “sudden” or “instantaneous.” Therefore, in the *Precious Wheel of Disputation* the discussion of how enlightenment is experienced is framed by this terminology:

The great fruit is not sought after but exists spontaneously arisen. It merges with the non-sought sphere and without effort the great meaning arises. Without wandering the great earth has been passed.¹⁹

VI. No-Thought in Ati-Yoga

The first thing to note in this context is that there is not a single term that expresses this basic notion, as with the Chinese *wu-nien*. In the Ati-Yoga system there are two basic sets of expressions that can mean no-thought. These are “no-movement” and “no-thought” proper.

First, within the Ati-Yoga one speaks of “no-movement” (Tb. *mi gyu pa*). By this term is meant both no movement of thoughts and no movement from the pure awareness (Tb. *rig pa*). In the *Root Tantra Without Birth Being the Great Sky Like Vajrasattva*, it says:

Various movements are the things of saṃsāra; not thinking, not moving is enlightenment.²⁰

As one can see from the first line, “movements” here can be understood as movement from pure awareness because “no-thought” is mentioned in the second line, leaving “movement” to mean something else. In regard to this pure awareness, the *Precious Wheel of Disputation* says:

The way in which the [pure] awareness abides is [that it is] clarity, unmoved, and not falling into extremes.²¹

Further, being in the state of pure awareness automatically implies that there are no discriminative thoughts arising. Thus, the two terms are mutually exclusive. But this is at the highest

level, of pure awareness. At slightly lower levels one can be purely aware of thoughts; that is, one is abiding in a state that has no attachment to or aversion from the thought projections. This can be seen from the fact that the term “pure awareness” (Tb. *rig pa*) can act as both a verb, meaning “purely aware,” and as a noun, meaning “pure awareness.”

However, the pure awareness is far more important to this system than that implied above for it is in fact the very goal of the meditation. This can be seen from the selections presented below:

As for the pure view, because of [that] nature, (i.e., emptiness) [one] enters right into the meaning. Moreover, the meaning of “pure” is the emptiness of thatness. “Emptiness” means an emptiness of attending [to] objects; it is not like being without something. The emptiness of a thing is the essence of pure awareness, and so forth.²²

... all the *dharmatās* of dharmas, the *bodhicitta* foundation—from the beginning one realizes [them] due to the pure awareness which is unarisen, unproduced, and without birth and death.²³

In the first quotation, pure awareness is defined as emptiness. This is called the pure view, which means here the highest view. In the second, the unarisen, unproduced, and non-saṃsāric pure awareness is the foundation of *bodhicitta* and the *dharmatās* of dharmas. Here, as mentioned before, *bodhicitta* is a definition of enlightenment. Therefore, enlightenment’s foundation is realizable by pure awareness. However, the pure awareness does not cause enlightenment, because this would mean that the two terms stand in a cause and effect relationship. This could not be the case, because the pure awareness is unarisen and unproduced. Therefore, enlightenment must come about in a natural spontaneous flash, for how can something that is unproduced produce something else? Therefore, as seen above and from the quotation below, enlightenment just spontaneously exists.

Saṃsāra and nirvāṇa both cannot be distinguished. As there is no duality, it is separated from fault and is excellent. From the beginning without beginning it is unspeakable and separate from

words. In essence it is the spontaneously sprung nature. The arising of realization and non-realization: when it is realized, [one] is a Buddha, and when it is not, [one] is an [ordinary] sentient being.²⁴

With regard to the expression of no-thought proper, again one should note that there is no specific technical term that has the same weight as the Chinese *wu-nien*. There are several terms that in general can be interpreted as meaning "no-thought" These are: *dmigs pa med pa*, *mi dmigs*, *sems pa med pa*, and *mi sems pa*. The first is translated as: without imagining, without thought, and without apprehending. The translation "without apprehending" is probably more technically accurate, and has been determined from reading various passages in the texts surveyed. However, the meaning "without thought" (i.e., no-thought) is also correct, but in a more general sense. The second, *mi dmigs*, having the same basic operative word as the above, is technically "no apprehension" or "no thought" in a general sense.

Finally *sems pa med pa* can be translated as: without thought, without imagining, or without intellectual activity. Also, *mi sems pa* can be translated as no-thought, no imagining, or no intellectual activity. The first translation of these two terms seems to be the more technically correct. This can be determined from the fact that for the Ati-Yoga system the term *sems* is understood as "constructing mind." This is a mind that is involved in the fundamental process of fabricating saṃsāra. Thus, *sems pa* has to be understood as something more basic than intellectual activity, for this exists on a sophisticated level. Although "imagining" has a constructive element to it, in English it seems to carry a notion of being something that is completely developed in a framework of illusion. Although one can say that saṃsāra is illusionary on the ultimate level, it does appear real on the conventional level. Imagining appears unreal on the conventional level, so within this context translating *sems pa* as imagining would be unacceptable. This leaves one with translating this term as no-thought. The word "thought" seems to contain enough flexibility to encompass more basic levels of the mental process as well as the more sophisticated, and at the same time contains a constructive element.

The etymology having been determined, the question can now be raised: What status does the notion of no-thought proper have within the Ati-Yoga system?

As has been seen above, the goal of meditation in this system is to arrive at a state of pure awareness. Since this pure awareness can be understood as being both dynamic and all-encompassing, it must be seen as being beyond the conceptual framework of the notion of no-thought. It is determined as dynamic because it is a positive statement that is open-ended about the experience of meditation. It is all-encompassing because one can be both in a state of pure awareness and purely aware of something. This something has been explained as the thatness of objects or thought projections.

If pure awareness is the goal of the meditation, then no-thought has to be seen as having another relationship to the process. This relationship, it seems, is that of a by-product of the meditation. When one is following the prescribed procedures of Ati-Yoga, then the flow of thoughts gradually slows and finally stops. One is not to try to stop the flow of thoughts, nor is one to try to increase it. The idea is to allow the thoughts to come or go without attachment or aversion, but at the same time to be aware of the flow itself. The flow of thoughts finally stopping of their own accord is spoken of as “liberated in their own place”:

What does it mean to understand Buddhahood in this way? [It means] everything is completed in this body, so that is pure *rDzogs Chen* (i.e., Ati-Yoga). Everything is complete in speech, so that is pure *rDzogs Chen*. Everything is completed in the object, so that is pure *rDzogs Chen*. Not entering the extensive vehicle of transmigration is the pure *rDzogs Chen*. The designation “being liberated in its own place” is the pure instruction. Cutting off hope and fear in the conditioned mind is the pure instruction. Gaining confidence in oneself is the pure instruction. So it is said²⁵

Thus, the use of the various terms that can be rendered as no-thought within this system must be understood as the use of a by-product to indicate the actual occurrence of something else, and in this case that is pure awareness. This is like pointing out the smoke to indicate the fire.

VII. Conclusion

I have presented a brief study of the notion of no-thought in Pao-T'ang Ch'an and early Ati-Yoga, systematized under three headings for each school. The first heading is "sudden enlightenment." Both schools maintain as their basic position that enlightenment comes about suddenly. This is not at all surprising, given the fact that both schools' philosophical foundation is the theory of Tathāgatagarbha.

Under the second heading, that of definition of enlightenment, it was noted that the Ch'an school can basically be determined to define enlightenment as *sva-citta*, while the Ati-Yoga system defines it as *bodhicitta*. This is a considerable difference, because in its development, the Ch'an school has started with the *Lañakāvātāra Sūtra*. It maintained a sūtra level understanding of enlightenment and although this particular development is seasoned by the theories put forth in the *Lañka* and other similar sūtras, it does not go beyond what can be understood on the sutra level. However, with the Ati-Yoga definition of enlightenment *bodhicitta*, one has entered the realm of the tantras. Here there is a completely different understanding of the mind, enlightenment, and the process for arriving at this exalted state. Therefore, the basic line of developmental differences between these two can be stated as the differences between the sūtras and the tantras.

Finally, the last heading was the notion of no-thought itself. It was determined that the Ch'an school under investigation had the basic notion that if there was thought, then there was saṃsāra; while if there was no-thought, then there was nirvāṇa. Thus for the Pao-T'ang school, no-thought became the goal. Within Ati-Yoga, the notion of no-thought itself is not presented as the goal. The goal, accordingly, is to arrive at a state of pure awareness. This then would relegate the notion of no-thought to a secondary role. This role is more than likely that of a by-product. That is, when one is in the state of pure awareness, the thought process has a tendency to decrease and finally subside. Thus, when the texts of this tradition speak of no-thought, they are pointing out the state by using a by-product of that state as a sign.

NOTES

1. Because the Ch'an school of Buddhism has been the subject of a considerable amount of investigation, in this brief paper I have only outlined major points and elucidated some of the differences between the Pao-T'ang and other schools of Ch'an.

2. Because Ati-Yoga does not now exist as a separate school of Buddhism, and historically from the advent of the Nyingma school this branch has been present, I have called it a "system."

3. From the hagiography of Vairocana we know that the Ati-Yoga was propagated in Khotan. Also, because the early Indian and Tibetan teachers, after propagating this system in Tibet, departed for Wu Tai Shan, it may have been propagated there, although the identification of the "five peaked mountain" mentioned in the texts with Wu Tai Shan in China is not certain. However, I have only been able to gain information on this from Tibetan sources. As in other studies of higher tantric practice in China, information and research by other scholars seems to be lacking.

4. E.g., Tucci, *Minor Buddhist Texts II*. Sceria Orientale Roma, Roma, 1958, pp. 21, 64 and 115; W.Y. Evans-Wentz, *The Tibetan Book of the Great Liberation*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969, p. 74; H.B. Guenther, *Tibetan Buddhism in Western Perspective*, Boulder: Shambhala, 1976, pp. 140 ff.; Eva Dargyey, *The Rise of Esoteric Buddhism in Tibet*. Delhi: Motilal Banaridass, 1977, p. 9.

5. Hwa Shang Mahāyāna (Ch. *Ma Ho Yen*), seems to have held the teachings of several Ch'an schools. The doctrinal affiliation of his teachings and the teachings of the Pao-T'ang school have been demonstrated by Hironobu Obata based on the *Tun wu ta ch'eng cheng li chueh*: see "The Study of Tibetan Ch'an Manuscripts Recovered from Tun huang," by Daishun Ueyana in *Early Ch'an in China and Tibet*, Berkeley Buddhist Studies Series, 1983, p. 338. The teachings of Hwa Shang as recorded in various Tibetan sources in particular are easily comparable with the Pao-T'ang teachings in the *Li Tai Fa Pao Chi*, especially on the question of "No-Thought." Also the *Blon po bKa'i Thang Yig*, a Nyingma text, cites the lineage of the Ch'an masters according to the *Li Tai Fa Pao Chi* and ends the list with Hwa Shang. See Daishun Ueyana, *ibid.*, p. 335.

6. *Journal of International Association of Buddhist Studies*, 1980, vol. 3, no. 1, p. 34.

7. See Robert B. Zeuschner, "The Concept of *Li nien* . . ." in *Early Ch'an*, p. 131.

8. D.T. Suzuki, *Zen Buddhism*. Garden City: Doubleday Anchor Books, 1956, pp. 157-8.

9. See Taisho Shinshu Daizokyo (2075, 174-196), vol. 51. For further bibliographical information see Yanagida Seizan, "The Li Tai Fa Pao Chi" in *Early Ch'an*, p. 44 ff.

10. Price, and Mou-Lan. *The Diamond Sutra and the Sutra of Hui Neng*. Berkeley: The Clear Light Series, 1969, p. 32.

11. Yanagida Seizan, "The Li Tai Fa Pao Chi," p. 30.

12. Ibid., p. 31.
13. Ibid., p. 32.
14. Ibid., p. 32.
15. Taken from *The Root Tantra Without Birth Being the Great Sky Like Vajrasatva* (Tb. *rDo rJe Sems dPa Nam Kha' Che rTse Ba'i rGyud sKye Ba Med Pa.*) in Hanson-Barber, A.W. *The Life and Teachings of Vairocana* (unpublished dissertation, Univ. of Wisconsin-Madison, 1984), p. 196. Tb. text, *Vairo rGyud 'Bum*. Leh: 1971, vol. 1, p. 293.
16. Also taken from *The Root Tantra Without Birth . . .*, p. 201; Tb. text, p. 297.
17. Ibid., p. 211; Tb. text, p. 305.
18. Stein, R.A., “Illumination Subite ou Saisie Simultanee,” in *Revue de l'Histoire des Religions*, vol. 179, 1971.
19. *The Precious Wheel of Disputation* (Tb. *Rin po che rTsad pa'i 'Khor lo bZhugs.*) PITT Peking ed. no. 5841, p. 121, plt.1. Hanson-Barber, p. 258.
20. Ibid., p. 196, Tb. text, p. 294.
21. Ibid., p. 230, Tb. text, p. 117, plt.5.
22. From the *A Tantric Commentary to the Heart Sutra* in Hanson-Barber, p. 183 (Tb. *Sher sNying 'Grel pa sNgags su 'Grel pa bZhugs*) PITT Peking ed. no. 5480, p. 113, plt.5.
23. From *Root Tantra . . .*, p. 204, Tb. text, p. 299.
24. From *The Precious Wheel of Disputation*, p. 236; Tb. text, p. 118, plt.3.
25. Ibid., p. 257; Tb. text, 118, plt.4.

Chinese characters

- a. 起心
- b. 妄
- c. 無心
- d. 妙極