

Legends in Ch'an: the Northern/Southern Schools Split, Hui-neng and the Platform Sutra

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 (for Helen)

One of the most durable and well-known legends in Ch'an (Zen) Buddhism is how the Fifth Patriarch, Hung-jen (600-674) (J. Daiman Konin), passed on the robe and the Zen succession to an illiterate wood-cutter, Hui-neng (638-713) (J. Daikan Eno) after a verse-writing contest. The story is at the heart of the Platform Sutra,¹ which appeared around 780, nearly a century after the events described supposedly happened. The Platform Sutra, allegedly a collection of sermons by Hui-neng, and the verse writing competition between Hui-neng and the monk Shen-hsiu (606?-706) (J. Gyokusen Jinshu), the presumptive heir to Hung-jen, are central to our perceptions of the Northern School, Southern School debate which broke out in the early 730s when the monk Shen-hui (684-758) launched an attack against the teachings of Shen-hsiu. It was Shen-hui who labeled these teachings as "Northern School" teachings. (McRae, 2003:54)

This essay will look at the debate between the so-called Northern and Southern Schools and how this evolved to become one of the enduring stories in Ch'an Buddhism and the role the Platform Sutra played in this history. Historically, the legend of Hui-neng and his (supposed) writing of the Platform Sutra is most likely to be a complete fabrication but this does not diminish the soteriological function of the story nor of the Platform Sutra. As Robert Aitken (1990:151) has pointed out, students of Zen "seek religious themes...[for] resolving life-and-death questions," not historical facts. Religious legends are a function of the "creative output" of the teachers and the school and are "an important guide to its [the school's] self-image." (McRae, 1986:10) However, history (as far as current research shows) should not be ignored altogether. Legends and myths can highlight archetypal themes useful in religious practice and "historical obscurity often serves as a prerequisite for posthumous claims regarding sectarian identity". (Welter, 1996) Certainly the legend of Hui-neng and the Platform Sutra laid the groundwork for the identity of Ch'an, Japanese Zen and the current understanding of Zen Buddhism's history among contemporary Western Zen practitioners. However, myths and legends can also distort a practitioner's expectations of the religion, leading to disillusionment and frustration. Truth should not be hidden nor faith be based on illusion.

¹ Yampolsky's complete translation of the Tun-Huang text is available [here](#) Another version, translated by A.F.Price and Wong Mou-Lam is available [here](#).

Unraveling the ‘true’ story of Hui-neng is probably impossible today unless new, authenticated documents are discovered. Yampolsky (1967:59) points out that the Hui-neng legend “grows from a single mention in a single text to an elaborate biography, filled with details and dates, seeming facts and patent legends.” While no true and accurate biography of Hui-neng can be written today, the story, culled from various ancient writings, runs something like this:

Hui-neng lived in the far south of China and his father died when he was three years old. His mother never remarried and gradually the family fell into poverty. To earn a living, Hui-neng became a wood-cutter. One day, on his way to market to sell his wood, he heard a sutra being chanted and upon inquiring found out that it was the Diamond Sutra and that it was being taught by Hung-jen at Huang-mei. Determined to study the Dharma, he left home and traveled to the East Mountain monastery at Huang-mei in Northern China, a long and undoubtedly perilous journey. After an interview with Master Hung-jen, who immediately recognized the great potential of Hui-neng, he was assigned to the rice-hulling shed, where he worked for some months in obscurity.

Meanwhile, Master Hung-jen, desiring to appoint a successor, announced a verse-writing competition where the verse would show an understanding of the Dharma, the winner of which would become the next Patriarch. None of the monks dared submit a poem, feeling that the senior monk, Shen-hsiu was the most worthy. Shen-hsiu himself, however, was unsure of his attainment so he wrote his poem anonymously on a wall that was being prepared for a mural depicting illustrations from the *Lankavatara* Sutra. His verse said:

The body is the bodhi tree
 The mind is like a bright mirror’s stand.
 At all times we must strive to polish it
 And must not let dust collect.

Everyone, including Master Hung-jen, praised the verse. The monks were told to recite the verse but privately the master told Shen-hsiu that his verse did not show true understanding of the Dharma and he should try again. Shen-hsiu was unable, however, to do so.

Completely ignorant of the master’s instructions regarding the succession, Hui-neng continued working threshing the rice until one day he heard a monk chanting Shen-hsiu’s verse. He realized immediately that the verse did not express the central meaning of Ch’an and asked to be taken to the wall where the verse was inscribed. Being illiterate, he asked someone else to inscribe his verse along side Shen-hsiu’s. Hui-neng’s poem read:

Bodhi originally has no tree
 The bright mirror also has no stand
 Fundamentally there is not a single thing
 Where could dust arise?²

Publicly, Master Hung-jen denigrated Hui-neng's poem but late that night he called in Hui-neng and taught him the ultimate teaching of the Diamond Sutra and the illiterate wood-cutter was profoundly awakened. Hui-neng received the transmission and the robe and was told to secretly leave the monastery that night and to stay hidden for sixteen years before beginning to teach.

Hui-neng traveled to the Fa-hsing temple in Nan-hai and found shelter there, hiding his understanding until one day he heard two monks arguing whether a temple flag was moving or whether it was the wind that was moving. Hui-neng, still a layman, humbly intruded, saying, "It is neither the flag nor the wind that moves; it is only your mind that moves." Upon hearing of this exchange, the temple master, Yin-tsung begged Hui-neng to reveal himself and begin teaching. Hui-neng showed him the robe of transmission and Yin-tsung shaved Hui-neng on the ordination platform that had been set up by Gunabhadra (394-468). After Hui-neng received the full precepts he preached the East Mountain teachings from the ordination platform. Thereafter, he became a famous Ch'an teacher in China, preaching the Dharma for some forty years. He died in 713, aged seventy-six, at the Kuo-en Temple in Hsin-chou.

This is the general outline of Hui-neng's story. How much is biography and how much is legend is impossible to say. The importance of the story is not in its historical factuality but what it says about both Buddhism and the development of Ch'an as we have it today. The two verses have been used in monasteries and Zen centres as teaching devices for well over a thousand years. The importance of the story historically is that it was from Hui-neng that all surviving subsequent lineages of Ch'an (and Zen) can be traced, at least by the commonly accepted lineage charts of Zen history that are circulated to this day.

² The Tun-Huang manuscript had two versions of Hui-neng's verse:

Bodhi originally has no tree	The mind is the Bodhi tree
The mirror also has no stand	The body is the mirror stand
Buddha nature is always clean and pure	The mirror is originally clean and pure
Where is there room for dust?	Where can it be stained by dust?

(All quotes from the Platform Sutra are from Yampolsky) Hui-neng's verse above (which is a later addition to the Platform Sutra) is from McRae (2003: 62)

These traditional lineage charts (and Ch'an history) show that Hui-neng was not the sole heir to Master Hung-jen but that the failed verse-writer Shen-hsiu was also appointed Dharma successor and, along with another successor, Chi-shen (609-702) (J. Shishu Chisen), went on to develop his own lineage which became known as the "Northern School." The bifurcation of early Ch'an into a supposedly inferior "Northern School" and a superior "Southern School" echoes the early history of Buddhism which split into a Mahayana ('Great Vehicle') sect and the (originally derogatory term) Hinayana ('Small Vehicle') sect. How the early Ch'an school was split in two is a fascinating story of power, self-aggrandizement and the development of religious doctrine.

Most contemporary Zen students would be familiar with the Hui-neng story and the teachings of this master, some of which ended up in koan collections such as the *Mumonkan*, but what happened to the so-called 'failed' verse-writer Shen-hsiu? Shen-hsiu went on to become one of the most revered and well-known teachers in the China of his day. In 701 he was invited by Empress Wu (684-705) to preach at the court in the imperial city of Lo-yang. He was welcomed with great pomp and ceremony to the capital and Empress Wu bowed before him and "touched her forehead to the ground and knelt for a long time" before the master. (McRae, 2003:47) Shen-hsiu went on to have a highly successful career preaching in Lo-yang and the other, larger, capital city, Chang'an. As McRae describes it, the Ch'an teaching of Shen-hsiu "became wildly popular in the greatest cities on earth, among the world's most sophisticated and cosmopolitan society." (*ibid*, p.51) Ch'an had moved from essentially a small Buddhist sect located in the rural areas of China to centre stage at the heart of ancient China.

Shen-hsiu's teachings were "breathtakingly simple", (*ibid*) based as they were on contemplation of the mind in every moment, clearly asking the students "to place emphasis on the enlightened mind at the centre of their being...to penetrate the entire cosmos and all individual activities." (*ibid*, p. 53) He was also the leading exponent of the Lankavatara sutra at that time. (Yampolsky 1967:17) Shen-hsiu saw the Buddha's utterances as metaphors for Buddhist meditation. He reinterpreted the scriptures, constantly using the writings to advocate meditation, spiritual practice and salvation of all beings in the here and now. For example, burning of incense is "the true, unconditioned Dharma, which "perfumes" the tainted and evil karma of ignorance and causes it to disappear", not simply a fragrance; vegetarian feasts "is interpreted as the ability to make the body and mind equally regulated and unconfused". (McRae, 2003:50) The purpose of these reinterpretations and metaphorical language was to advocate the constant practice of "contemplation of the mind" to convince Buddhist practitioners that the school was teaching an authentic Buddhist doctrine of the highest order. (McRae, 1986:198)

The teachings of this school were highly successful and popular with the elites of China as well as with the commoners. Shen-hsiu never characterized his teaching as "Northern School"; that was a later title. He called his teachings "East Mountain Teaching" in recognition of his Dharma debt to Hung-jen. A later disciple of Shen-hsiu, P'u-chi (651-739)

(J. Suzan Fujaku), also used the label “Southern School” for these teachings. (McRae, 1986:240) Although history now brands Shen-hsiu’s teachings as “Northern School” teachings, it should be remembered that this was originally meant as a pejorative term to differentiate these teachings from what ultimately became the most successful teachings, the so-called “Southern School”.

It was a virtually unknown monk, Shen-hui (670-762) (J. Katakū Jinne), who began the attack on Shen-hsiu’s teachings. On January 15, 732, at a Great Dharma Assembly at Ta-yun-ssu monastery in Honan Province, Shen-hui made a shocking and strident attack on Shen-hsiu and his Dharma heirs, derogatively applying the label “Northern School” to these teachings, an appellation which has remained throughout history. Shen-hui, somewhat self-servingly, accused Shen-hsiu of usurping the title of Sixth Patriarch (and his Dharma heir P’u-chi of claiming to be the Seventh Patriarch) and asserted that the relatively unknown teacher Hui-neng was the true Sixth Patriarch and only Hui-neng’s lineage taught true Ch’an. The fact that Shen-hui also studied with Hui-neng and claimed Dharma transmission from the old master did not hurt his chances of creating a lineage that went through himself back to Bodhidharma.

Texts discovered in the Tun-huang caves may offer a glimpse into Shen-hui’s attack. (see Dumoulin, 1994:112-113) Shen-hui claimed that Bodhidharma’s robe, possessed by Hui-neng, authenticated the Ch’an lineage through Hui-neng to the First Patriarch. This gave the Hui-neng lineage the authentic (and by implication) the sole right to transmit the Buddha mind. He also asserted that the Patriarchs disdained mixing with the royal court (unlike Shen-hsiu and the Northern School teachers) and based their teachings not on sutra or ceremony, but on transmitting the authentic Buddha no-mind. When it was pointed out that both Hui-neng and Shen-hsiu studied under the same master, Hung-jen, and therefore their teachings would be the same, Shen-hui vigorously denied that their teachings were the same. Here he accused Shen-hsiu of promoting “gradual enlightenment” as opposed to Hui-neng’s “sudden enlightenment” teachings. According to Shen-hui, true enlightenment was a sudden breakthrough to no-mind where liberation lay, not through an inward reflection searching for enlightenment. This spurious debate over “sudden” versus “gradual” enlightenment in the Northern School teachings was one of the cornerstones of Shen-hui’s attacks and this debate seems to continue today. But whether *enlightenment* can be labeled as “sudden” or “gradual” is specious. The *process* of meditation is by its very nature “gradual”, taking place (usually) over many years.

One of the difficulties for early Ch’an was to create its own identity as being separate from other mainstream Buddhist teachings such as Pure Land, T’ien-t’ai and Hua-yen, and its desire to be seen as an original and superior teaching, a unique ‘school’ or ‘sect’ within Buddhism. Once it could be recognized as a unique school within Buddhism, it could (later) position itself in the centre of Buddhist thought, representing itself as the core teachings of the Buddha. (Poceski, 2000) One of the methods Ch’an used for asserting its own identity was claiming a direct and unbroken lineage from the Buddha. Another was its emphasis on

enlightenment which could not be achieved through the performance of good deeds or good thoughts, as reflected in Bodhidharma's dismissal of the Emperor Wu of the Liang Dynasty as having gained no merit from building temples, translating sutras or ordaining priests. The debate over "gradual" versus "sudden" encompassed the debate over whether cultivation of morality, the performance of good deeds and the avoidance of evil, the study of sutras and the role of *upaya*, expedient means, have in the attainment of enlightenment. Ch'an denied that these were necessary precursors to enlightenment as *all* thought was seen as being illusionary. As the eighth century Chinese monk Mo-ho-yen simply stated:

The state of samsara is merely the result of deluded thoughts. Enlightenment is achieved by not grasping at these thoughts and not dwelling on them, by not bringing them to mind, by not inspecting the mind, but by merely being aware of all thoughts as they arise. (Gomez, 1983:89)

All thoughts cloud the mind and therefore cultivating 'good' thoughts is an impediment to liberation. Furthermore, "all conceptions without exception are false. If one sees conceptions as no conception, then one see the Tathagata." (*ibid*, p. 90) It was teachings such as these that set Ch'an apart from the other Buddhist schools. And it was teachings such as these that spurred the debate between "sudden" and "gradual" awakening.³

Shen-hui began his attacks on the so-called "Northern School" two years prior to the Great Dharma Assembly of 732 and presumably continued until his own death in 762. A number of writings purporting to be by Shen-hui are extant and one striking feature of these writings is the absence of meditation teaching, a central practice in Ch'an, then and now. McRae (2003:56) sees this as reflecting not a decline in the importance of meditation practice in Ch'an, but because Shen-hui's "personal religious vocation was that of an evangelist, recruiter, and fund-raiser rather than that of a spiritual mentor". However, it may be an exaggeration to say that Shen-hui disdained meditation altogether. In the *Shen-hui ho-shang i-ch*, (cited in Yampolsky, 1967:33), in reply to the question whether controlling the mind, settling the mind and concentrating the mind to enter *dhyana*, were right practice, Shen-hui denied they were right practice, stating

The sitting I'm talking about means not to give rise to thoughts. The meditation I'm talking about is to see the original nature....Not to give rise to thoughts, emptiness without being, this is the true meditation....The ability to see the non-rising of thoughts, to see emptiness without being, this is the true wisdom (*prajna*); at the moment there is wisdom, this is the function of meditation. Thus, the moment there is meditation, it is no different from wisdom....by their nature, of themselves, meditation and wisdom are alike.

³ Faure (1986:119) also points out that the sudden/gradual conflict had "political nuances that may have informed these discourses" but these nuances are inaccessible to us now. Shen-hui's attacks on the Northern School certainly had political overtones, given the favor the Northern School held in the Imperial Court.

Wisdom (*prajna*) cannot be found by “settling the mind to see purity”. What Shen-hui was attacking was what he saw as erroneous “Northern School” meditation practices which supposedly taught concentration to enter *dhyana* (meditation, ch’an, zen) and thereby attain enlightenment. Had Shen-hui rejected meditation practice altogether, then the only conclusion one could come to was that his teachings were subsequently ignored. However, his “Southern School” swept away the opposition and became the most dominate form of Ch’an and remains so today.

Although history has, in a sense, vindicated Shen-hui’s position, in many respects he was, at best, a questionable (though highly effective) evangelist for Ch’an. He was not above making up stories to promote Hui-neng and his “school”. He claimed that Bodhidharma and all subsequent masters in the lineage taught the Diamond Sutra rather than the Lankavatara Sutra, a claim Yampolsky (1967:34) dismisses as “pure fabrication.” Dumoulin (1994:113-114) called him “unscrupulous” in his attacks on the Northern School. Shen-hui accused Northern School practitioners of attempting to steal Bodhidharma’s robe, trying to cut off the head of Hui-neng’s mummified body, effacing Hui-neng’s tomb inscription and altering the inscription on Shen-hsiu’s stele to call him the Sixth Patriarch (Yampolsky, 1967:28-29; Dumoulin, 1994:113-114) He also claimed that he was a tenth stage bodhisattva, a claim Poceski judges as “outrageous”. Although Shen-hui criticized Shen-hsiu’s successes in currying favour with the imperial court as being unrepresentative of traditional Ch’an practices, which theoretically disdained wealth and power⁴, he became a highly successful fund-raiser for the government after the An Lu-shan rebellion (755-763). To raise funds to fight the rebellion, the government set up ordination platforms and sold monk’s certificates. Shen-hui was called upon to assist with this money-raiser and was spectacularly successfully in Lo-yang, contributing significant sums to the government coffers. (Yampolsky, 1967:36; McRae, 2003:107) The Japanese Buddhist scholar Ui Hakuju suggested that Shen-hui displayed “traits deserving of moral censure and criticism for intolerance.” (cited in Dumoulin, 1994:114)

Regardless of how Shen-hui’s personality is judged over a millennium later, there is no doubt that he was highly influential in the development of Ch’an. Through his unrelenting and sustained attacks against the Shen-hsiu lineage he created a crisis in Ch’an in ancient China that eventually led to the Zen we know today. However, to say that Shen-hui’s attacks were the *cause* of the decline of the Northern School would be an oversimplification. Certainly they were a contributing factor, but a host of reasons combined to drive the Northern School into obscurity. (see below) In fact, the Northern School continued to increase in size, peaking in the 770s, about a decade after the death of Shen-hui. (McRae, 1986:240) The Northern School was significant in the spread of Ch’an to Tibet, Korea and Japan and died out in the mid-ninth or early tenth centuries. Ironically, Shen-hui’s lineage also faded away, possibly

⁴ It should be noted that Shen-hsiu’s imperial patron, the Empress Wu, was a problematic figure in China at the time as the first female emperor, one who many believed had usurped the throne illegitimately. Shen-hui’s attacks, coming as they did during Emperor Hsuan-tsung’s (712-756) reign had considerable political overtones as well as religious ones.

around the time of the Buddhist persecutions of the Hui-ch'ang era (842-845). Other than Tsung-mi (780-841), it produced no particularly notable heirs. (Yampolsky, 1967:37)

Although the provenance of the Platform Sutra of the Sixth Patriarch cannot any longer be firmly established, there is little doubt that this writing was instrumental in promoting Shen-hui's "Southern School" domination of the Ch'an of ancient China and catapulting Hui-neng into the revered position he has held ever since. The writing single-handedly created one of the most enduring legends of Ch'an and has guided students and teachers for over one thousand years. It continues to be studied in Zen centres around the world. Few writings in today's Zen Buddhism are as influential and durable.

Hardly any contemporary scholars believe that the Platform Sutra is a record of the words of Hui-neng. The oldest version extant (*Southern School Sudden Doctrine, Supreme Mahayana Great Perfection of Wisdom: The Platform Sutra preached by the Sixth Patriarch Hui-neng at the Ta-fan Temple in Shao-chou, one roll, recorded by the spreader of the Dharma, the disciple Fa-hai, who at the same time received the Precepts of Formlessness*) was discovered in the treasure-trove of Buddhist writings and artifacts in the Tun-Huang caves in 1907. Unfortunately, the text is a copy of an earlier work and is "highly corrupt, filled with errors, miscopyings, lacunae, superfluous passages and repetitions, inconsistencies, almost every conceivable kind of mistake." (Yampolsky, 1967:89) Although there is no date on the text, this version would appear to be written sometime between 830 and 860 (*ibid*, p. 90) When and by whom the original was written is a debatable matter, unlikely to ever be firmly established. McRae (1986:60) claims that the sutra first appeared around 780 although it may well have surfaced earlier. Authorship is even more problematic.⁵ The Preface and compilation is attributed to the monk Fa-hai but nothing is known about this person other than that he may have been a disciple of Hsuan-su. (668-752) (J. Genso) Yampolsky (1967:64) finds the Preface "suspect", having "no historical validity whatsoever as a source for Hui-neng's biography."

While discovering the authorship and date of the "original" Platform Sutra may be of interest to historians, far more interesting to Zen students is the content and the formation of the Hui-neng legend, for the Platform Sutra is unquestionably a masterpiece of early Ch'an writings. It created not only a new religious vision for Ch'an, but also a new history, one that is still referred to today in the world's Zen centres.

It was through the Platform Sutra that the legend of Hui-neng was created and promoted. It will be recalled that Hui-neng gained his first insights upon hearing verses from the Diamond Sutra. The great proselytizer and bombast, Shen-hui, was one of the earliest monks (but not

⁵ McRae (1983:189) seems to accept Fa-hai as "the original compiler" although later in the same essay he labels him as "the author of the Platform Sutra". In a later work (1986:241) McRae states that the sutra was "compiled by a member of the Ox-head School." In an even later text (2003:56), McRae makes no assertion as to the authorship, stating only that the crises in Ch'an between the Northern and Southern School was "resolved by the appearance of...the Oxhead School, and the composition of the Platform Sutra." Yampolsky (1967:90) believes that the authorship "cannot be resolved".

the only one) to promote the Diamond Sutra over the more prominent Lankavatara Sutra, which was generally associated with the “Northern School” (Shen-hsiu was a leading exponent of the Lankavatara Sutra). Remember also that in the story of the poetry writing contest, Hung-jen was planning to paint murals depicting scenes from the Lankavatara Sutra on the monastery walls but these were never done as the poems were written on the walls instead. When Hui-neng was called to see Master Hung-jen, he was taught the Diamond Sutra which awakened him fully prior to receiving the robe of transmission. Furthermore, when Hui-neng finally revealed himself and was ordained a monk, it was on an ordination platform supposedly built by Gunabhadra, translator of the Lankavatara Sutra.⁶ All of these details were an allegory promoting the Diamond Sutra over the Lankavatara Sutra, thereby reducing the importance of the Northern School teachings⁷.

One of the key attacks on the Northern School by Shen-hui was the debate over “sudden” versus “gradual” enlightenment. The Platform Sutra addressed the debate by stating:

Good friends, in the Dharma there is no sudden or gradual, but among people some are keen and others dull. The deluded recommend the gradual method, the enlightened practice the sudden teaching. To understand the original mind of yourself is to see into your own original nature. Once enlightened, there is from the outset no distinction between these two methods; those who are not enlightened will for long kalpas be caught in the cycle of transmigration. (sec.16)

The distinction here between “sudden” and “gradual” is the distinction between the awakened and the still deluded. However, nowhere in the sutra does it say that “sudden” means without effort or easily attained. The contradistinction in the sutra appears to be between directly perceiving one’s Buddha nature (self-nature, original nature, true reality, etc) through meditation and a step-by-step meditation process. How to achieve this “sudden” breakthrough is explained through the concept of “no-thought”. Thoughts are seen as arising continually from the past into the present and through to the future. Cutting off one thought cuts off all thought (by an unexplained process) and leads to “no-thought”, the state of enlightenment. (Yampolsky, 1967:116)

Further on in the text another attempt is made in settling the “sudden”, “gradual” conflict:

⁶ A very early work found in Tun-Huang, the *Leng-chia shih-tzu* (circa 712-741) places Gunabhadra as the First Patriarch and teacher of Bodhidharma. This was later rejected among Ch’an circles and never took hold in the Patriarchal lineage legends. (see Yampolsky, 1967:20)

⁷ It is interesting to note that the great Ma-tsu (709-799) (J. Baso Doitsu) appeared to reverse this emphasis on the Diamond Sutra stating: “Fearing that you will be too confused and will not believe that this One Mind is inherent in all of you, he [Bodhidharma] used the *Lankāvatāra Scripture* to seal the sentient beings' mind-ground. Therefore, in the *Lankāvatāra Scripture*, mind is the essence of all the Buddha's teachings, no gate is the Dharma-gate.” (cited in Poceski, 2000) This appears to be a rejection of Shen-hui’s promotion of the Diamond Sutra.

The Dharma is one teaching, but people are from the north and south, so Southern and Northern Schools have been established. What is meant by ‘gradual’ and ‘sudden’? The Dharma itself is the same, but in seeing it there is a slow way and a fast way. Seen slowly, it is the gradual; seen fast it is the sudden. Dharma is without sudden or gradual, but some people are keen and others dull; hence the names ‘sudden’ and gradual’. (sec. 39)

While Shen-hui attacked the Northern School’s teaching as being “gradual” and therefore inferior, the Platform Sutra takes a more nuanced approach and makes the distinction between the two as being between the abilities of the practitioner, perhaps an allusion to ‘expedient means’ (*upaya*) of teaching. At the same time it has a political aim: to establish Hui-neng as the Sixth Patriarch and Shen-hui as the Seventh. While the sutra takes a clear position on meditation practice as seeing directly into one’s own true nature and rejects any dichotomy such as ‘purity’ and ‘impurity’ as implied by “polishing” the mirror of the mind and not allowing “dust collect” (as stated in Shen-hsiu’s verse at Hung-jen’s monastery), an interpretation that was a fundamental point in Shen-hui’s attacks on the Northern School, the question remains, though, whether this was an accurate understanding of Shen-hsiu’s verse and subsequent teachings.

Traditionally, Shen-hsiu’s Dharma-verse has been interpreted as advocating a gradual teaching where the practitioner attempts perfection by steadily eliminating illusions, constantly polishing the mirror of the mind. Hui-neng’s verse, on the other hand, apparently refuses to engage in any duality, stating “Fundamentally there is not a single thing”. One is seen as a superior teaching over the other. However, this may be an overly simplistic interpretation. The two verses could be seen together as a pair rather than individually as Hui-neng’s verse makes little sense on its own and needs Shen-hsiu’s verse to be understood. The first verse, Shen-hsiu’s, maintains that practice must be constant and unending, a position taken in the Platform Sutra when the master on his deathbed directed his students to continue sitting after he was gone.(sec. 53) Subsequent teachings of Ch’an and Zen also taught constant, unrelenting practice even after enlightenment. Taken together, the two verses should not be interpreted as representative of two different schools but as a single “polarity”. McRae (McRae, 1983:64) sees Shen-hsiu’s verse as expressing Buddhist teachings in “*formal terms*” (*ibid*, p. 65, original emphasis) while Hui-neng’s verse goes a step further and expresses the teachings through the language of emptiness. Another interpretation could be that the first verse refers to the ‘how’, the methodology of constant meditation practice⁸ and the second refers to the ultimate ‘result’ of the practice, describing the teaching from an enlightened viewpoint where ‘body and mind’ have dropped away. If this were so, then Hui-neng’s verse would clearly be a superior expression of the Dharma.

⁸ According to some versions of the sutra, after Hung-jen read Shen-hsiu’s verse he commented: “If they [the monks] put its teaching into actual practice, they will be saved from the misery of being born in these evil realms of existence,” indicating that the master saw the verse as practice, a method, to attain enlightenment. (see Price & Wong, n.d., p. 6)

However the verses are interpreted, what is unambiguous is that the Northern School never taught “gradualism” nor does Shen-hsiu’s verse advocate such a practice. Extant texts of the Northern School are clear that in the metaphor of the mirror, the illuminative quality of the mirror, its ability to reflect, is innate, “a never-ending brilliance of the mind’s inherent capacity for wisdom”. (McRae, 1983:225) The clear Buddha mind that is every person’s inherent being cannot be obscured by an illusionary dust which does not really exist. The Northern School text *Liao-hsing chu* (Stanzas on the Comprehension of the [Buddha]-Nature) states:

It is like a bright mirror on which there is dust. How could [the dust] damage its essential brightness? Although [the dust], may temporarily obstruct [the mirror], rubbing will return the brightness. The brightness is fundamentally bright. (McRae, 1983:250 n. 91)

What Shen-hsiu and the Northern School were advocating was continual practice. Furthermore, Shen-hsiu clearly understood the “sudden” nature of enlightenment. In the *Kuan-hsin lun* (Treatise on the Contemplation of the Mind)⁹ he wrote:

It does not take long to witness this (i.e., to realize sagehood); enlightenment is in the instant. Why worry about your white hair? (*ibid*, p. 209)

It is also in the *Kuan-hsin lun* that Shen-hsiu discusses the meaning of the gradual, sudden and perfect teachings, one of the earliest Ch’an texts to discuss these three conjointly, (*ibid*, p. 211) indicating he was well aware of these concepts (he states unequivocally that the three are different). In Shen-hsiu’s teaching, gradual teaching is attachment to the understanding that the sensory realms are produced by false thoughts of one’s own mind and therefore, ultimately, there are no realms, no limits to before or after. The sudden teachings, on the other hand, are the realization that the mind is without essence and false thoughts themselves are without any essence (see *ibid*, p. 152); in other words, the comprehension of emptiness, a point taken up in Hui-neng’s verse: “Fundamentally there is not a single thing.”¹⁰

To see the Northern School teaching as “gradualist” is fundamentally simplistic and incorrect, although this is the interpretation that has come down through the centuries. The Northern School teachings were far more complex than the simplistic dichotomy of “gradual” versus “sudden” implies. This is not to deny that this was not a burning issue among Buddhists, and not only in China. In the late ninth century (either 781 or 787) the Chinese dhyana master Mo-ho-yen was invited to Lhasa in Tibet to debate the merits of the “sudden” teachings. There is some confusion regarding the identity of Mo-ho-yen. One source claims him as a student of the Southern School of Shen-hui while another sees him as a student of Shen-hsiu’s successors in the Northern School. One of his teachings was “gazing

⁹ Originally thought to be a Bodhidharma text, the *Kuan-hsin lun* is “beyond question” a Shen-hsiu text (McRae, 1983:148)

¹⁰ A Tun-huang text which reflects the Northern School teachings contains the line: “within suchness there originally is really not a single thing.” (McRae, 2003:67)

at mind”, originally a Northern School teaching and his teaching seems consistent with the Northern School. (Broughton, 1983:8-9)¹¹ The “mind-gazing” or “mind-contemplation” of the Northern School was certainly not an “freezing” of the mind, as Shen-hui claimed, but a “dissolving” of the mind. As Bernard Faure (1986:111) unequivocally states: “Clearly, the Northern School’s fundamental teaching...is “sudden”— and not “gradual”, as its opponents claimed.”

The Platform Sutra drew extensively upon many of the teachings of the Northern School as well as the writings of Shen-hui — enough that some believe that either he or one of his disciples wrote the Platform Sutra.¹² It also draws on well-known canonical sources, such as the Diamond Sutra and the Vimalakirti Sutra and the concepts from the Prajnaparamita writings. The teachings expressed in the sutra are by no means original to Hui-neng and he admits this unoriginality in section 12, stating, “My teaching has been handed down from the sages of the past; it is not my personal knowledge.” Early Ch’an took great care to trace its teachings back to the Buddhist canon to legitimize its teachings within the broader Buddhist movement. (see Poceski, 2000) While Shen-hui’s methods of promoting his school may be controversial, the fact is that he had an enormous influence in the development of Ch’an and Zen through the teachings of the Platform Sutra which took up so many of his teachings. It is his vitriolic polemics which can be criticized, not his understanding of Buddhism.

But the Platform Sutra did more than address the Northern/Southern controversy. In the biography of Hui-neng, we have the story of how an illiterate ‘barbarian’ from the south became a Patriarch even before he became a monk. The meaning of this is quite clear: anyone can attain liberation in Ch’an, regardless of learning or status. One does not even have to be a monk (a position, by the way, contrary to what Shen-hui preached. He saw lay people as potential converts to monk-hood or as financial assets, not potential enlightened beings in their own right. (McRae, 2003:66)) This made Ch’an Buddhism a universal doctrine and practice open to all who seek an end to suffering.

It is also in the Platform Sutra that we first come across the idea that a master has but one ‘patriarchal’ heir. It was Shen-hui who first listed the Ch’an patriarchs by number, showing their generation. (see *ibid*, p. 67, n.32)¹³ And it was Shen-hui who made much of the transmission of Bodhidharma’s robe as a symbol of authentication, stating:

¹¹ See also Gomez (1983)

¹² In Section 49, the text reads: “Some twenty years after I have died evil dharmas will run rampant and becloud the essentials of my teaching. Then someone will come forward and, at the risk of his life, fix the correct and false in Buddhism.” This passage, which seems to refer to Shen-hui and his teachings, has led to speculation that the Platform Sutra was written by a member of Shen-hui’s school. Shen-hui is mentioned twice in the sutra. The first time he is admonished for his deluded thinking. (sec. 44) The second time is when Hui-neng is on his deathbed and says: “Shen-hui, you are a young monk, yet you have attained [the status of awakening] in which good and not good are identical, and you are not moved by judgments of praise and blame.” (sec. 48)

¹³ It was the Platform Sutra which fixed the number of Indian Patriarchs at twenty-eight. (Dumoulin, 1994:127)

The robe is proof of the Dharma, and the Dharma is the doctrine [confirmed by the possession] of the robe. Both Dharma and robe are passed on through each other. There is no other transmission. Without the robe, the Dharma cannot be spread, and without the Dharma, the robe cannot be obtained. (Dumoulin, 1994:113)

It is ironic that it was in the Platform Sutra that this robe finally lost its importance as a symbol of transmission. Hui-neng refused to pass on the robe: “The robe may not be handed down.” (sec. 49) Instead, the sutra itself became the symbol of transmission and owning a copy gave legitimacy to the bearer as an authentic Ch’an master. As a result, a number of copies circulated throughout ancient China and, over a period of time, the Platform Sutra acquired a number of accretions, adjustments and clarifications until it became difficult to know for certain what was in the original (lost) writing and what was added later.¹⁴ The popular edition in general use today is the version published by Tsung-pao in 1291 at Nan-hai in Southern China.¹⁵

The opening story in the Platform Sutra of the ‘mind verses’ of Shen-hsiu and Hui-neng is one of the most enduring and best-loved stories in contemporary Zen but the question must be asked whether anything like this actually happened. On this, McRae (2003:67) is quite adamant: “there is no such possibility whatsoever”. There is no evidence that both were at Hung-jen’s monastery at the same time. Indeed, the evidence that does exist indicates that they could not have been there together. Furthermore, the idea that there should only be one ‘patriarch’ would have been “inconceivable” (*ibid*) to Hung-jen as this concept arose only through the sermonizing of Shen-hui, much later.

In the saga of the Northern/Southern School controversy and the creation of the Platform Sutra, naming Hui-neng as the Sixth Patriarch, Shen-hui plays the pivotal role. Whether he should be seen as the hero or villain is an open question. Certainly he appears to be a man of questionable character, one willing to stretch the boundaries of the truth for his own purposes, a bombastic proselytizer, a master storyteller and eventually a man of some influence in his era. He played a role in the eventual decline of the so-called “Northern School” teachings but perhaps not the central role some may believe. He was also a man of some influence in subsequent Ch’an teachings. Much of the Platform Sutra reflects his own teachings and the move away from the Lankavatara Sutra as a central text in Ch’an. It was through Shen-hui’s attacks on the ‘gradual’ approach to enlightenment that subsequent Ch’an texts refrained from specific instructions on types of meditation practices, as “*any* method was by definition gradualistic in some fashion.” (McRae, 2003:57, original emphasis) As for the ‘mind verses’, Shen-hui never mentioned the story in any of his writings. Nor does the

¹⁴ In 1290, the monk Te-i published a version, complaining: “The Platform Sutra has been greatly abridged by later writers and the complete import [of the teachings] of the Sixth Patriarch is difficult to discern.” (cited in Yampolsky, 1967:107)

¹⁵ See for example, The Dharma Treasure of the Altar Sutra of the Sixth Patriarch (Lu Tsu Ta Shih Fa Pao T’an Ching) by Lu K’uan Yu (Charles Luk) pp 15-102 in Ch’an and Zen Teachings, Vol. 3. Shen-yen dates this version as “during the chih-yuan era (1335-1340) of the Yuan dynasty”. The 1291 date is Yampolsky’s (p. 107)

Platform Sutra appear in any of his writings, indicating that the sutra was probably written after his death in 758. Indeed, he appeared to know very little about his own master, leading McRae (*ibid*, p. 68) to speculate that he “may have actually gained rather little more from Huineng than the certification of his own enlightenment.”

The Platform Sutra seems to have had limited influence during the subsequent Chinese eras, not gaining widespread circulation until Ming dynasty (1368-1644) when it became very popular among the lay population as well as the monastics. The sutra was brought to Japan (as the *Sokei daishi betsuden*) very early in its history by Saicho (767-822) (Dumoulin, 1994:128) but it played a minor role in Kamakura era (1192-1333) Zen. Legend has Dogen (1200-1253) copying a version of the sutra, the Daijōji edition, but Yampolsky doubts that the text is in Dogen’s hand.¹⁶ (Yampolsky, 1967:100) Contemporary interest in the Platform Sutra came with the discovery of the Tun-hung manuscript in 1907.

The Platform Sutra was a seminal text in Tang dynasty Ch’an, a culmination of Ch’an to that date but later developments in Ch’an and Japanese Zen seem to overtake the teachings. ‘Encounter dialogue’ became one of the most important methods of teaching subsequently and the Platform Sutra may have set the stage for this development but this method was never developed in the sutra. The sutra can be seen as a transitional teaching between early and the “classical” Ch’an which followed. Certainly the key line from the mind verse: “Fundamentally there is not a single thing”, remains as a central concept in contemporary Zen but this line was added to the sutra later and there is no evidence whatsoever that Hui-neng said this. Regardless of the encrustations of legend and myth surrounding the text and the Sixth Patriarch, the text today is influential in Zen and as a teaching, remains valued.

Shen-hsiu’s “Northern School” eventually faded from influence in Ch’an. Undoubtedly Shen-hui’s attacks on the school, the subsequent publishing of the Platform Sutra (the only writing outside the canon of the purported words of the Buddha to achieve the status of “sutra”) and the influence of such teachers as Ma-tsu, (709-788) who traced their Dharma lineage to Hui-neng, contributed to the decline of the influence of the Northern School. But other forces were also at work. The rebellion by An Lu-shan from 755-63 fatally weakened the imperial government of China and changed forever the governance of China. The Northern School was perceived as being intimate with the Chinese throne, an untenable position with the decline of the power of the court. By the end of the eighth century a new and exciting esoteric Buddhism, promising miracles from curing illness to battlefield victories, arose in the capital cities and Ch’an was beginning to look dated among the elites. As McRae (1986:242) points out, “The literate courtiers of Lo-yang and Ch’ang-an were always very keen on the latest intellectual and cultural trends; thus interest in the Northern School...could not have been maintained for more than a few decades.” In 845 the

¹⁶ In discussing “seeing into the nature” in the essay *Shizen-Biku*, Dogen appeared to attack the Platform Sutra, saying: “The Sixth Patriarch’s Platform Sutra contains the words seeing the nature, but that text is a fake text; it is not the writing of one to whom the Dharma-treasury was transmitted...It is a text upon which descendants of the Buddhist Patriarch absolutely never rely.” (Nishijima & Cross, 1999:201)

government began the great persecution of Buddhism and in 875-84 the Huang Chao rebellion devastated Northern China. The Southern School, located as it was in the rural areas far from the major cities of the North managed to ride out these upheavals. Furthermore, while by convention the teachings of Shen-hsiu are referred to as “Northern School”, no such “school” actually existed. Members of this group did not see themselves as part of a centralized authority and their loyalty lay with the Dharma and their own teacher, not with a particular “school”. (*ibid*, p. 244) As a consequence, members of the Northern School gradually merged with whatever subsequent phases arose in Ch’an. It should be remembered that there were many ‘factions’ of Ch’an throughout its long and colourful history and all but a few vanished as identifiable entities. This should not be seen as a sign of strength or weakness in any particular ‘school’ but as a sign of the maturation of the religion with each ‘school’ adding to the complex that makes up today’s Zen.

The arguments over “sudden” versus “gradual” that enveloped Ch’an in the eighth and into the ninth century can be seen as a struggle to develop a coherent orthodoxy in the religion. The needs of ordinary people, trapped in samsara and suffering, seeking a way out of their pain, could not and can not be met by philosophical argumentation. Ch’an may have adopted “sudden” as its orthodox position but to teach, Ch’an had to use “gradual” methods, and “most of the time, they merely concealed this fact with their “sudden” terminology.” (Faure, 1986:117) Later, another split would occur between those practicing kung-an (koan) study and the “silent illumination” of Dogen Zen. Ch’an (and Zen) would take another step in its long historical development.

Shen-hsiu of the Northern School and Shen-hui of the Southern School both made significant contributions to the development of Ch’an Buddhism and should be recognized as such without the divisiveness of one being “better” than the other. Each, in his own time and place, in his own way, enriched the development of Ch’an. Likewise, the legends and myths of Ch’an enrich Buddhism. The ‘Dharma battle’ between Shen-hsiu and Hui-neng may never have actually occurred historically but the teachings in the allegory outlive the historical inaccuracy and still have something to say to contemporary Zen students. While history may say that no verses were ever written on Hung-jen’s monastery walls and that the Platform Sutra is not the words of Hui-neng, fundamentally, for today’s Zen students, the teachings of Zen Buddhism is more important than its fascinating history.

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