

HISTORY: the genealogy of mind

Long ago, Zen master Pai-chang, who was Huang Po's teacher, was scolded by his teacher Ma-tsu with such a loud voice that it almost shattered his eardrums. Huang Po heard this story from Pai-chang and was enlightened. This is what we mean by saying the old masters are still living.

Dogen¹

A truly historical thinking must also think its own historicity.

H. G. Gadamer²

Although John Blofeld assumed that, since Huang Po spoke "from a direct perception of truth" he would therefore take no interest in history, the texts he translated show just the opposite. Huang Po lived in an era in which a new history was beginning to be composed, the history of the "Zen school," a new "school" of Chinese Buddhism which was being created precisely in this act of writing.³ The framework for this new history was the "transmission of mind," which consisted of stories about how "enlightened mind" had been transmitted from the Buddhas down through "Patriarchs" to the present. These historical narratives function in the texts to bring the Zen issues of "mind" and "enlightenment" to the fore, to make them intelligible and attractive. These stories provide rationale for the whole monastic enterprise and feature the particular style of practice structured into Hung-chou Zen monasteries.

These "Zen" stories continued to develop and to "circulate" throughout China, becoming very influential over the next few centuries after Huang Po. As their influence grew, new authors and editors appeared within the Zen monastic world, interested in systematizing the narratives

¹ Dogen Zenji, *Shobogenzo*, trans. Kosen Nishiyama (Tokyo: Nakayana Shobo, 1975), volume II, p. 142. ² Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, p. 16.

³ One of the earliest appearances of the phrase, "Zen school" (*Ch'an-tsung*) is to be found in Huang Po's *Essentials of Mind Transmission*.

by bringing the individual stories together into a holistic view of Buddhist and human history. Thus, the primary genre of Zen literature, the “Lamp Histories,” is historical in its most basic orientation and structure. The most influential of these, partly because of its early appearance, was the *Transmission of the Lamp, Ching-te Era*. Published in 1004, this text absorbed and gathered what there was of the Huang Po literature up into itself. From this point on, for the most part, the Huang Po literature would only exist and circulate as a segment of this larger literature. Naturally, therefore, the legacy of Huang Po would henceforth be interpreted and understood from this more comprehensive historical perspective. From then on, Huang Po would be seen as a crucial link in a vastly larger project. This larger historical vision was already explicit in the Huang Po texts in a rudimentary form. The symbols of transmission and many of its most important stories were already there. In the *Transmission of the Lamp* and subsequent “Lamp Histories,” however, we see its systematic outcome. Our inquiry here poses two basic questions: what is the conception of history into which the Huang Po texts have been absorbed, and how does this “historical consciousness” relate to the primary matter of Zen – “enlightened mind?”

The initial difficulty with the first of these two questions is that, although the voluminous *Transmission of the Lamp* text is thoroughly historical in character, no “theory” of history is explicit in the text, nor, for that matter, anywhere else in Zen literature. Nevertheless, the language and structure of the text show us in various ways the understanding of history that is presupposed in Zen transmission practices. The historical intention of this text can be gleaned from its title (*Ching-te ch’uan teng lu*): it consists of “records” (*lu*) of “transmission” (*ch’uan*) as seen from the perspective of a particular historical era – the Ching-te Imperial era within the Northern Sung dynasty. What was being transmitted – a lamp and its light (*teng*) – was the fundamental aim of the tradition, enlightenment or “awakening.” The overall narrative structure of the text, therefore, is a story of the origins and dissemination of “enlightened mind” beginning with the ancient Buddhas and continuing through Indian and Chinese patriarchs up to current recipients of transmission.⁴ Temporal, chronological structure – earliest to most recent – is maintained throughout the text: Huang Po follows the generation of his teacher, Pai-chang, and is succeeded by the generation of his students, such as Lin-chi, and so on. Within this overarching historical framework,

⁴ For an elaboration on this historical structure, see McRae, *The Northern School*, p. 75.

the actual content of the text employed to tell the story of mind transmission is religious biography.

The historical, narrative structure of the text is, therefore, twofold: biographical histories, themselves individually temporalized in a narrative order moving from birth through death, are placed within the overarching history of human enlightenment. The text's editors venture no reflections on sacred history as a whole – on its meaning, *telos*, or significance. Aside from genealogical charts that serve as periodic tables of content, all interesting detail enters the narrative on the level of individual history. This detail takes basically two forms. First, we are provided with essential biographical information at the beginning and then again at the end of each account. Typically we get an account of names, origins, early signs of brilliance, circumstances of ordination, and some account of the content of early monastic studies. At the end of biographies we often find a transmission *gatha* or poem, an account of the Zen master's death, and its date, along with subsequent Imperial decrees concerning posthumous names, titles, and pagoda inscriptions.

Between these two extremities, however, is content even more pertinent to the transmission of mind – that is, narratives recounting particular events in the Zen master's life in which the power and efficacy of his "awakening" are clearly manifest. These occasions are most often rhetorical occasions, discursive events that in one way or another display the character of enlightened mind. These stories, more than anything else in classical Zen, were understood to demonstrate what it means to be awakened. What is important to recognize, however, is the way in which these enlightened events receive their full meaning and significance only when placed within the overarching context of Zen history. Enlightenment is not figured as an isolated and unrelated event, nor simply as an experience of eternity in the present moment. In each case enlightenment is a historical event located in a particular temporal, spatial context. The point here is simple: that the classical Zen interest in history is more central to their concerns than we have taken it to be, and that, beyond the Zen rhetoric of timelessness, we find historical contextualization to be central to their self-understanding.

In order to specify further the role that history plays in Zen, we turn to the key metaphors and symbols that place people and events into temporal relation. How are historical connections construed in this text? Primarily, it seems, through a complex set of metaphors drawn from the domain of family genealogy. Most basic to this symbolic order is that

Zen itself came to be understood as a *tsung*, a word evolving out of the ancient Chinese sense of ancestry.⁵ In the most general and archaic sense *tsung* meant “ancestor,” and came by extension to connote anything related to clan or family ancestry. It is clear that throughout the Sung and subsequent epochs, the term continued to carry deep pre-Buddhist religious connotations – ancestral spirits oversee and guide the clan. They are to be revered, followed, and honored; it was they who established the clan and made it what it is. In effect, the clan’s identity is a gift of the ancestors; only through them can one understand what it is. Similarly, understanding Zen as a clan-like institution meant conceiving it in genealogical terms. Knowing what it meant to belong to the institution entailed knowing from whom it had been inherited, a historical knowledge transmitted and inculcated by means of narratives like *The Transmission of the Lamp*.

In effect, then, we can think of this text as analogous to a document of family history; it communicates a distinct Zen identity by means of significant family stories. Moreover, we see that family lineage and genealogy provide virtually all significant terms of relation within the Zen clan. Bodhidharma, the founding figure of the lineage, is called the “first ancestor” (*ch’u-tsu*), the patriarch of patriarchs.⁶ Subsequent patriarchs are his “*dharma* heirs” (*fa-ssu*), each of whom can be located on distinct branches of the family tree. Relations among later Zen masters are also figured in genealogical terms, basic kinship titles such as “uncle,” “nephew,” and “cousin,” providing the overall framework. Words related to “inheritance” provide the primary symbols for patriarchal succession – the transmission of Zen mind from one generation to the next.

The Transmission of the Lamp pictures the Zen master in constant search of an appropriate heir, someone who is seen as capable of being a “vessel” or “receptacle” of the *dharma*. The Chinese term here is *ch’i*: a sacred, ceremonial vessel used in ancient times to make ritual offerings to the ancestors. A *ch’i* is also a tool or instrument, something that exists for the sake of something else. In this case, the patriarchs exist for the sake of the *dharma* and for posterity. Like the ceremonial vessel, they receive, preserve, and transmit the substance of the sacred. *Dharma* transmission from one generation to the next is also figured as the impression made by

⁵ For more on the concept of *tsung*, see Yanagida, *Shoki Zenshu Shisho no Kenkyu*; Foulk, *The Ch’an School*; and McRae, *The Northern School*.

⁶ Yanagida traces the Zen history of the term “patriarch” in *Shoki Zenshu Shisho no Kenkyu*. See also Yampolsky, *The Platform Sutra*, pp. 1–23.

a “seal” or “stamp” (*yin*) upon the mind and character of the inheritor. The so-called “mind seal” is imprinted upon the next generation’s practice and experience by virtue of long-standing co-practice under the guidance of the master. The Zen practice of issuing certificates of “inheritance” or “authorization” doubles this metaphor of the stamp through the use of an actual seal stamping a document certifying that the holder has in fact received the master’s seal upon his mind.

Occasional passages in the text allude to a sense of “debt” that inheritance accrues. Being selected and trained as an heir imposes enormous obligation and responsibility – a debt to be repaid. This responsibility is figured as a form of filial reverence that a descendent owes to the family lineage. “Confession” of this debt is common in the text, where a newly selected successor announces his gratitude and subsequent obligation to others in the lineage. The master warns the recipient not to “neglect posterity,” and that “inheriting the *dharma*” imposes an obligation to carry out the transmission as the ancestors had done. Being placed in a genealogy establishes relation not just to the past but to the future as well.⁷ In order to feel this obligation to past and future generations, the inheritor must have a working understanding of the history of the lineage, not just knowing it but striving to embody it in act and discourse.

All of the genealogical terms that we see applied to patriarchal succession are applicable to the majority of practitioners who have not succeeded to the abbotship. They too stand in a concrete lineage location, they too inherit the *dharma* and pass it along to the next generation, primarily through the everyday teaching that socializes a new generation of monks. They are all *Ch’an-tzu*, “children of Zen,” raised by the family elders and socialized into the lineage. As the offspring of a particular master, raised in this monastic household rather than some other, they all manifest a distinct “family spirit” (*chia-feng*), the particular style of Zen behavior and rhetoric characteristic of the lineage.⁸ Given the way in which sense of identity in Zen was structured upon models and terms supplied by family life and lineage, it is not surprising to find that role models, socialization, and mimetic repetition were essential to the way in which Zen practice came to be understood. To practice Zen was to repeat the ancient, ancestral Buddha pattern, and in turn to have its stamp placed upon one’s character and comportment.

⁷ For interesting reflections on themes related to past, present, and future generations, see Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, volume III, pp. 109–116.

⁸ Ricoeur elaborates on the relation between language and tradition in *Time and Narrative*, volume III, p. 221.9

One of the most important forms of this repetition was the repeated retelling, rereading, and rethinking of Zen narratives like those in the *Transmission of the Lamp*. By means of mental repetition, narrative shapes the participant's self-identity. "Narrative selfhood" here means that who the monk becomes, how he fits himself into the world, is to a great extent shaped by the stories into which he has been socialized. "I can only answer the question 'What am I to do?' if I can answer the prior question 'Of what story or stories do I find myself a part?'"⁹ In the case of Zen, this would be to say that personal identity or self-understanding was communicated only partly by doctrines concerning the self, and much more by narratives, models, and precedents. Moreover, the doctrines themselves are integrally tied to the narratives and can be understood only in terms of particular exemplars described in narrative texts. As in other clans, the *Ch'an-tzu*, the "children of Zen," come to understand who they are and what they are doing through the process of hearing and acting out the stories of Zen. Much of this understanding was inculcated through rituals performed in the "ancestor hall" where ancestral tablets and other sacred objects of the lineage were displayed and celebrated.

Prior to the "practice of presence" are stories weaving the concept of "presence" into conscious understanding; prior to the practice of "meditation" are the narratives of meditation telling who did it, how, when, and to what effect. This realization helps us see that narrative, historical identity would have been an essential component of enlightened identity. What this means is that, although the Zen tradition did come to conceptualize and to represent the experience of "awakening" in vocabulary that expresses timelessness and an ahistorical ground, even more prominent in its representation are the genealogical, historical metaphors of relatedness that we have begun to describe here. Furthermore, the ahistorical concept of enlightenment comes to be situated under the overarching structure of genealogy such that belonging to the Zen clan becomes a background, stage-setting factor for the experience of enlightenment – a condition of its possibility. Since "awakening" was figured first and foremost as an "inheritance," the tradition naturally assumed that only well-socialized family members came into its possession. Thus enlightenment and historical understanding were integrally related.¹⁰

⁹ MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, p. 216.

¹⁰ Modern interpreters, under the influence of the language of "universality," have ignored this genealogical dimension of "Zen," preferring instead to read it as an excellent example of the transcendence of tradition and history.

What is intriguing about the *Transmission of the Lamp* as a historical document is the extent to which it has been structured as a montage of earlier traditions, a characteristic which reveals something of the historical consciousness presupposed in it. Editors of the text have essentially gathered together all of the legends, stories, and other texts related to the key figures in the lineage. Then through substantial editing, rewriting, and repositioning, they have organized a new text and, through it, a revised understanding of the tradition. Furthermore, while drawing heavily on prior texts, the editors have made no effort at attribution. Innumerable bits and pieces of other texts are woven together into a new one without citation, quotation, or other devices that might credit the appropriate sources. These rewoven texts fail to heed historical chronology (in *our* sense), hence “anachronism,” a slip or failure in the chronological order of things, is a common characteristic of the texts. We find, for example, in the early chapters of *The Transmission of the Lamp*, the “ancient Buddhas” speaking in the Zen riddles of the Sung dynasty *koan* tradition, thus belying their antiquity. We find Bodhidharma presiding over a “Zen sect” that wouldn’t even be born for several more centuries, and Pai-chang stipulating in the mid-T’ang rules and procedures for Zen monasteries that wouldn’t have been feasible until the advent of post-T’ang culture.

Moreover, editors seem very little concerned about the accuracy or legitimacy of their sources. Epistemological concerns – how do we know that this story about Huang Po really did occur? – seem to be subordinate interests at best. From our modern perspective, what we notice is that objective authentication of sources is not the reigning criterion of inclusion. What seems to matter is not where the story came from, but how good it is, and how well it might serve the purposes of transmission.

Although, as a participant in modern romanticism, Blofeld wanted to “believe” against the weight of modern doubt, he could not escape being a “modern,” and thus, at times, setting “Buddhism” up for cross-examination. “How do we know,” Blofeld found himself asking, “that the Mahayana claim to have preserved the highest teachings, some of them esoterically, is valid? Can we be so sure that these ‘teachings’ were not put into the mouth of the Buddha by later generations of monks?”¹¹ Although epistemological questions of this sort were not unknown in the pre-modern Buddhist world, on the rare occasions when they did appear, their purpose was not a denial of the tradition but a defense of

¹¹ Blofeld, *The Wheel of Life*, p. 51.

it by way of refuting a “forgery” which threatened to weaken the “original” tradition. That is to say, skeptical questioning served the particular purposes of the tradition rather than, as in modernity, becoming a universal trait of mind. Blofeld’s text shows that, although he could not escape these questions which arose in his modern mind “naturally,” as a romantic, he could find good reasons to set them aside, or even to refute them. Thus, in this particular case, when his teacher appealed to “intuitive knowledge of Reality gained by mystics of all ages,” and “the experience of the Eternal,” Blofeld’s critical distance was undercut once again. He “nodded thoughtfully. This argument was impressive.”¹² Indeed, it was Blofeld’s own argument, and that of a whole generation of young English-language romantics who had come to seek wisdom in the “other” of foreign and past traditions. Blofeld had learned it in England, long before coming to China. In fact, it was the “reason” he came, and it was all he had to hold the modern critical posture of epistemology at bay.

When this “critical posture” of modernity becomes dominant, as it has in the historians of modern culture, a very different sense of “history” emerges. From this perspective, the “Lamp Histories” are not really histories, or, if they are, they are poor ones, weak in objectivity and in methodical procedure. It comes to seem, in fact, that the stories Huang Po and the editors of the “Lamp Histories” told about the origins of Zen are ahistorical, and, therefore, false. For the critical historian, this is not how Zen came to be what it is. Modern historians of Buddhism, therefore, have set out to rewrite this history and, on the basis of critically defined sources, to set straight the historical record on Zen.

Rather than to present these modern conclusions about the history of Zen, our concern will be to look behind both traditions of history to see what differences in perspective can be found there. What is the difference in historical consciousness between the medieval Zen monk who has written a “history of Zen” and the modern western historian who now seeks to rewrite that history? Although the differences between these distinct traditions of historical thought could be shaped in any number of forms and in varying degrees of specificity, we will here characterize the contrast in terms of four basic points.

First, Zen historians see themselves and their own texts as standing in continuity to the tradition. Because they “recapitulate” and “hand down” what has already been handed down to them, their texts stand in

¹² Blofeld, *The Wheel of Life*, p. 51.

full continuity with their sources. This continuity is based on a kind of atemporal essentialism, in spite of the centrality of the doctrine of “impermanence” in Buddhist thought. The assumption of temporal unity makes history appear without fundamental transformations. It was assumed that the Buddha lived in a world essentially like that of Sung-dynasty China. From this perspective, the Buddhist past cannot be perceived as foreign to the present, its “pastness” is overcome by the thought of the eternal presence of the unchanged Buddha Nature. Innovations in Zen, therefore, are not seen *as* innovations; they are recapitulations of a timeless identity.

Modern historians, by contrast, draw a line of separation between the object of study and their own text about that object. The modern history of Buddhism is not to be considered a reenactment of that tradition. Their “secondary” works are of an entirely different order than that of the “primary” texts which serve as their data base. A great “historical” distance divides them, which, for the modern historian, means that their natures are not the same. For the critical historian, the past is truly past, that is, fundamentally different from the present, and, therefore, not a likely object of veneration. The modern historian sees that Zen changes in the midst of its denial of change, precisely by claiming its innovations to be timeless and original. “Anachronism,” from this perspective, comes to be judged a fallacy, an inability to see that history is dynamic, diverse, and fissured. Each text is to be seen not *as* binding upon the present, but *as* valid and meaningful within its own particular historical location, now past and therefore accessible to objective study.

Second, feeling this sense of continuity, Zen historians act as participants, fully engaged by the stories they transmit. They assume that the literature of the tradition addresses them directly. Stories about past actualities are taken to be current possibilities, fully applicable to current historians in their own context. Prior commitment to Zen and a sense of belonging to it is the rationale for writing its history. Historians in the Zen tradition don’t deny that the stories they transmit belong to a past context. What they deny is that this context is categorically different from the one in which they seek wisdom.

Modern historians shift the context of understanding. The text is to be understood, not in relation to the historian in his or her context, but in relation to its original context in another time and place. Bracketing out the present context of meaning, the historian describes what the text once meant to others. Having shifted the relevant context of understanding from the present to the past, the appropriate descriptive terms

for the historian's relation to the tradition are not "engagement," "participation," and "commitment," but rather "neutrality," "objectivity," and "critical distance."

Third, Zen historians hope to be freely and thoroughly influenced by the tradition they write about. Because the text at hand, no matter how ancient in origin, is assumed to be fully applicable to their own context, their posture toward it is responsive, not just open but eager to undergo whatever influence it bears. Their ideal is that the language and character of the text have been imprinted upon and joined to their own language and character. Writing the historical text and transmitting it to future generations are acts of Zen practice; they activate the powers of "dependent origination" both in themselves and in others.

The modern historian, by contrast, makes a commitment to avoid that influence on the grounds that it might invalidate the history that he or she has written. The principle of objectivity requires that the historian's voice remain distinct from, and not overlap with, that of the text. The line between what the Buddhist text asserts and what the modern historian asserts about it must in every instance remain clear. While the Buddhist historian strives to learn *from* the text, the modern historian is content to learn *about* it. Although the historian *may* belong to some tradition of thought and practice, this commitment must not affect the way in which the history of Zen is presented.

Fourth, Zen historians assume the overriding truth of the Buddhist tradition and take themselves to be fully accountable for the recapitulation of that truth. Their text is not just a report on what other Buddhists once said, but also what they, the Zen historians, now say. Thus accountable, the stories they transmit must in some way accord with the current "sense of the *dharma*." Whenever they don't, the stories are either edited to highlight allegorical means of understanding, or appropriately altered. In extreme cases, they can simply be omitted from the new text on the pretext that corruption has led to a loss of relevant meaning. No matter what the method, the new text is not just a record of past beliefs, it is a transmission of *dharma*. This is simply to say that it is "true," and every effort must be made by historians to see that it remains that way. They assume that only when the past can legitimately make a claim to truth upon the present is it worth knowing.

The modern historian understands truth primarily as representational accuracy. He or she seeks to know what the text really did say in its own context, and to describe how people in that epoch really did use it. This task requires that he or she bracket, at least for the time being,

all opinions about whether what was accurately reported is, in fact, true. The past of Zen is presented as accurately as possible *as past, as having* made a claim to truth upon others in another era. The historian assumes that his or her own views on its current truth are irrelevant, and that it simply isn't the historian's job to consider that question. This posture in the author virtually guarantees that it won't be read *as* a source of truth either, although it is always unpredictable what allegorical readers and romantics will do with a text.

From the perspective of the modern historian, the procedures of the Zen historian are flawed to the point of producing "bad history." Lacking sufficient distance from the tradition, the Zen historian fails to describe the tradition accurately because the position from which his text is written conjoins and confuses how it was with how it is or how it should have been from the point of view of current idealization.

The weakness, however, of Zen historical consciousness is not just that it alters or ignores the data available to historical narrative. It is more importantly that its underlying assumptions and desires concerning the continuity, coherence, and idealized form of the tradition, structure for the historian a perspective from which the transformations and "disjunctions" of the tradition, and therefore its own otherness to itself, cannot be seen. If current practitioners model themselves on the ancients *and* the ancients are updated to fit the current image of "awakening," then no fundamental difference remains between ideals past and present. The figure of the ancestors evolves along with the understanding of what "enlightenment" could mean to the extent that each new generation, in the process of practicing "through" the ancestors, projects its highest aspirations onto the ancestors. Thus the ancestors always represent what the current practitioner could conceivably become, even though that conception changes over time, and the height of the ideal as projected makes its actualization virtually impossible.¹³ Lacking a way to represent the "otherness" of the tradition to itself (other than through a concept of "fall" which was common in Chinese Buddhism), the Zen historian has no perspective from which the present understanding can be seen as an alteration of the past. One consequence of this is that there is no perspective from which the present can be criticized, other than that of the

¹³ By this is meant simply that human beings at any stage of development will be able to imagine ideals greater than they can currently achieve, which is essentially what ideals are – something beyond the present, the possible actualization of which will require concerted effort, transformation, and time. Wherever actualization of any kind has occurred, new ideals will have been made possible.

present itself, which can only take the form of chastisement for a failure to live up to current ideals.¹⁴ Practitioners, therefore, live out of a highly idealized and therefore typically “precritical” understanding of their own tradition. What is lost, then, in traditional Zen historiography, when seen from our current perspectives? From the perspective of scientific historiography – the mainstream of current practice – what is lost is accuracy. The facts – what really did happen – have been placed in subservience to the desire for mythic ideals. From the perspective of “post-modern” historiography – the emergent tradition of Foucault and others – what is lost is complexity, “difference,” and disjuncture, all hidden from view by the dominant desire for unity and identity in Zen.¹⁵

Equally possible, however, and even more to the point of reflexive meditation, is to formulate a critique running in the other direction – a critique of current historical consciousness from the perspective of Zen. What can an understanding of the classical Zen sense of history show us about our own practice of historiography and the understanding of history upon which it is based? Two major possibilities come to mind.

First, compared to the Zen tradition, our historical practices demonstrate very little sense of belonging to a tradition. We imagine ourselves tradition-free observers, representing no particular point of view and responsible to no one. On this point, however, we are mistaken. Like Zen

¹⁴ This account is overstated in order to highlight one side of a more complex interaction. The texts did in fact serve as an ancient perspective from which the present historical moment could be criticized. This would have been so in several important ways, including the myth of the “degenerating *dharmā*.” But at least two factors diminished the extent to which this “difference” between past and present could be recognized. The first, suggested above, is that the texts were altered to bring them into accord with the language and thought of the present era. Thus their “otherness” was erased whenever it seemed to protrude. The second is that, even when the text was not altered, the overriding assumption that past and present are in full correspondence sets up the likelihood that whatever the text says will be given a new and current sense, rather than being seen as a “difference” demanding critical judgment regarding former and current points of view. Since, being enlightened, the ancients had to be right, rather than surpassed in the onward surge of history, they had to be interpreted in such a way that they not only were “true,” but also continued to represent the highest achievements projectable by current imagination.

¹⁵ The work of Bernard Faure gives the most direct access to this point of view. He writes, for example, that “the complex reality of Chan was gradually replaced by a simplistic image of its mythic past” (*The Rhetoric of Immediacy*, p. 19), and that “The ideological work of the tradition has been to hide the diversity and contingency of its origins behind an apparent consensus of orthodoxy” (p. 16). The same texts which, when interpreted in terms of the Zen symbols of “unity” and “identity”, yield the mythic tradition, re-emerge, when interpreted in terms of contemporary symbols of “difference” and “diversity,” with quite a different history. Zen points of departure do hide “diversity,” and ours do hide “unity.” We would only be justified in claiming that the Zen tradition was hiding a unity that it knew very well was there if we were also willing to entertain the correlative point that, behind our faith in “difference,” we are hiding a unity that we know very well is there.

Buddhists, we do, in fact, stand within a tradition and write out of a particular context and point of view. Although lack of self-understanding on the issue of standpoint does not mean that we stand nowhere, exempting us from its consequences, it does mean that the quality and depth of our stance in study is significantly diminished. Knowing where you stand is important, as is understanding the relation between where you stand and what you study. In consequence of our view, we weaken the relation to tradition that we do inevitably have, which, in turn, weakens the tradition itself.¹⁶ In the Zen texts under consideration, historical understanding is not regarded as an act of individual subjectivity. It is instead conceived as an act of tradition which places the individual self into the process of history, where past and future are joined to the present. When the tradition is conceived as a generous donor, offering its vast legacy to subsequent generations, then a sense of indebtedness results. Reciprocation, repayment, goes not to the actual donors, the teachers who will no longer be there, but to the tradition itself which they now represent. This sense of gratitude and its corresponding desire for reciprocation in the form of repayment to the future is so prominent in Zen texts, and so impressive, that it would be hard not to sense in the act of reading it some form of lack or deprivation in our own relation to tradition, no matter how conceived.

Second, studying the various kinds of relationship between reader and text in the Zen tradition may bring to our attention a weakness in the extent of reflexivity or self-awareness that we bring to our study. This weakness is a consequence of the modern inclination to take natural science as the model toward which humanistic study should aspire. Valorizing objective disengagement, historical studies of Buddhism tend not to relate the Buddhist text at issue to the context of the interpreter. Thus isolated, Buddhist texts tend not to serve as the impetus to seek a deeper understanding of the positions and assumptions out of which our work proceeds, nor as encouragement to discover what of significance could be learned “from” these texts. We proceed, in effect, as if we aren’t really involved. In this respect the narratives we tell about ourselves are underdeveloped.¹⁷ They fail to locate us in a productive relation to the

¹⁶ “Modern historical research itself is not only research, but the transmission of tradition” (Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, p. 253). Gadamer’s work is the primary source for the concepts of “tradition” and “historicity” operative in this chapter. See also Alasdair MacIntyre, *Three Rival Versions*.

¹⁷ For a critique of modern historiography on this point, see LaCapra, *Rethinking Intellectual History: Texts, Contexts, Language*.

text, one through which we might be provoked by the text, either to understand our own position more deeply, or to rethink, revise, or expand it. A reflexive relation to the text takes advantage of whatever light the text can shed on its reader. When this reflexive relation is lacking or weak, the very rationale for historical study has become obscured. As the Matsu section of the *Transmission of the Lamp* asserts, the most important answers to our questions about Buddhism can be discovered only in self-conscious relation to “the one who is doing the questioning.”

Although the deficiencies we have found in both traditions of historiography are, at this level of description, polar opposites of one another, they can also be understood to share a fundamental similarity: both the Zen Buddhist and modern western historical traditions deny implicitly some dimension of the impermanence of history, the radical mutability of temporal movement. Although the Buddhist tradition highlights the deficiency of the present – its unsatisfactory character due to which the ancestral Buddhas need be consulted and imitated – it is neither able to consider critically the deficiencies of the past, nor the possible inapplicability of past truths to present contingencies. And although modern historians understand very clearly the deficiency of the past – the relativity of “out-moded” ideas and practices to their own historical context – they tend to assume the universality and noncontextual truth of their own setting, including modern ideas and practices of historiography. One tradition – the Buddhist – experiences the lack or absence of the present in relation to the fullness of the enlightened past, while the other – the modern – maintains that, whereas the full presence of true historical knowledge is now possible, it appears not to have been so in the past, given that premodern historians, lacking critical methods, seem to have been so often mistaken.

In both traditions, however, one dimension of time stands exempt from the negativity of historical finitude. Locating a kind of historical understanding that overcomes these particular deficiencies is therefore a matter of learning to avoid these exemptions. Working toward this kind of self-awareness in our study would, in effect, constitute work toward the development of new and more encompassing criteria of truth for historical reflection.

Because each style of historiography evolves within its own cultural tradition, and upon the conceptual and practical bases supplied for it by other dimensions of culture, it should not be surprising that each places its focus differently and orients itself to past, present, and future in a distinct way. The possibility of a significant transformation of historical

consciousness in each of these cultures is greatly enhanced in the current setting by the availability of different traditions of historical reflection in relation to which each tradition can understand, evaluate, and critique itself.

Already the social, cultural ramifications of the rethinking of both Chinese history and the practice of historiography in China, in light of their encounter with Marxist and other forms of western historical reflection, have been immense. Signs now exist that some form of alteration has begun to occur in western historical thinking as a result, in part, of the twentieth-century encounter with the rest of the world. These signs are promising; indeed, exciting. They push historical imagination to consider possibilities hitherto closed to thinking. It would be a mistake, however (in fact a mistake symptomatic of the modern tendency to exempt its own standpoint from contextualization), to regard this present activity of placing two traditions of historiography in critical relation to one another as itself occupying a position outside and “beyond” those traditions. In a finite, diverse, and historical world, “non-traditional” and all-encompassing theories of history are not possible. What is possible, however, is that, through the encounter with other cultures and epochs, particular traditions of historical reflection will become in some way richer, more comprehensive, more self-critical, and more applicable to cultural ends which are themselves open to similar transformation.