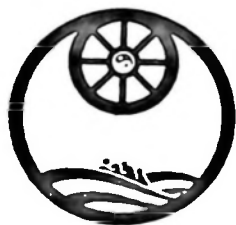


Early Ch'an in China and Tibet

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The Concept of *li nien* ("being free from thinking") in the Northern Line of Ch'an Buddhism

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Some of the more interesting problems in the history of the development of early Chinese Ch'an Buddhism surround the conflict between the Southern line of Ho-tsê Shen-hui (670–762) and the Northern line established by Shen-hsiu (605?–796). The details of the dispute are complicated by political considerations as well as possible doctrinal differences, and no attempt will be made to cover all aspects of this problem in this paper. Our topic is a possible doctrinal difference and the question of its legitimacy. So, we will focus upon one of the more important concepts found in the writings of the Northern line of Ch'an,¹ that of *li nien* (離念), for we feel that an analysis of this central idea might be able to provide a rationale for a doctrinal dispute between the two Ch'an lines. Our analysis will also open the possibility that there might have been a misunderstanding of the Northern Ch'an concept of *li nien* on the part of the founder of the Southern line, Ho-tsê Shen-hui.

A common attitude taken towards the Southern line of Shen-hui is that the Southern line instigated the conflict, motivated entirely by political aspirations. That there were political considerations can hardly be doubted. However, this does not confine us to the position that the political motivations were the sole difference. We intend to investigate the possibility that *li nien* might be interpreted as suggesting that the student of Ch'an should attempt to eliminate all thinking from the mind itself by consciously stopping the arising of thoughts. That this was the way the Southern line interpreted the teachings of the Northern line can hardly be doubted. The next question, whether such an interpretation was a forced and deliberate misinterpretation of those teachings, is one which cannot be easily answered. Must one willfully distort *li nien* and wrench it from its contexts in order to arrive at the understanding of the Southern line? This is the basic question to which we shall address ourselves.

PART I: GENERAL STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

The Chinese character *li* 離 (*hanareru* in Japanese) is used quite often in a large number of interrelated passages in the writings of the Northern line of Ch'an. One of the more interesting of those passages is *hsin-t'i li nien* (心體離念),² which may be tentatively translated into English as "the mind-itself is free from thinking." As is clear from the Chinese phrase, the character *li* establishes a relationship between "the mind itself" and the process of "thinking."

An interesting problem arises if we note that the contexts in which the Chinese term *li* appears are somewhat ambiguous, and the question arises: what precisely is meant by the expression *hsin-t'i li nien*? The attempt to become clear on this is what we shall address ourselves to in the main body of this paper. When this task is completed we will be in a position to apply our findings to the conflict between the two lines of early Ch'an Buddhism.

To begin with, we find ourselves with two interrelated problems:

(1) What is the most likely way to understand the passage *hsin-t'i li nien*?

(2) What English term or expression seems closest to the original meaning of *li* intended by the authors of the Northern Ch'an writings? Clearly, in order to answer the second question, we must first deal with (1). In order to answer (1), we propose the following steps for establishing the most likely meanings for *li* in the context of the phrase *hsin-t'i li nien*:

- (1) Attempt to become clear about all possible meanings for *li*, both as an ordinary Chinese word and as a Buddhist technical term.
- (2) Examine typical passages where *li* appears in the writings of the Northern line in order to grasp the context and range of usages.
- (3) Attempt to determine if there is any single sense of *li* (say li_k) which can be used consistently in all of the passages in question. If one li_k can be shown to work in all, or in a significant majority of the passages, it is likely that this particular sense has a strong claim to being the one originally intended by the authors of the passage in question. However, one must recognize that even if such a li_k can be shown to exist, it does not provide conclusive proof that the authors of the passage had only this sense in mind in each and every appearance of the term.³

PART II: THE MEANINGS OF 'LI'

According to the Chinese Buddhist Tradition

Among the standard Buddhist meanings for *li* are the following:⁴

The cutting off of evil or misdeeds [sever, cut off, eradicate, suppress, exterminate, root out, etc.] To shun, abstain from, keep away, keep at a distance; stand aloof; be estranged; remove, abolish, cancel; exclude. Used as a translation for "being free from the world" (Nirvana).

To be exempt from, get rid of, avoid, evade.

Throw away, discard, abandon, give up, renounce, relinquish.

To leave, part from, apart from, abandon;

To leave the impure, abandon the defiling influences of the passions or illusion.

To leave, to be free from desire, or the passions

Non-Buddhist Meanings for 'Li'

As used in ordinary Chinese, *li* conveys a number of very similar meanings such as:⁵

To leave; to retire; to separate.

Distant from; apart from. To fall into. To meet with. To pass through.

Separation, separate. Part from; come off, become disjoined, digress, get free; become estranged; separate; disconnect, sever, detach; keep apart; alienate; isolate; let go, release, set free.

Separate; part from; fall apart, come off; become disjoined.

Leave, quit; depart; go away from. . . .

Sanskrit Terms Translated by 'Li'

Apparently *li* was not used to render any single Sanskrit term in general in Chinese Buddhist texts, and thus we can find a large number of Sanskrit terms translated by *li* in the Chinese Buddhist literature. Among the numerous terms, we might note the following:⁶

a-vikṣiptatā; ni-han; nihatya; rahitātva; varjita; vi-kṣip; vikṣipet; viyoga; vivarjita; vi-vṛj; vivarjya; viśaṃhyoga; viśāra; vṛj; vyapeta;

saṃpravajana; veramaṇi; virati; parivarjana; varjana; varjita; varajita; vivarjya; viratigraha; varjya; apakarṣana; tiraskṛta; niḥsāra; niḥsarana; nirmukta; vinismukta; pratyākhāya; vikṣepāt.

PART III: SORTING OUT THE POSSIBLE MEANINGS FOR 'LI'

In order to determine in what manner the mind itself is free from thinking (*hsin-t'i li nien*), we must consider the variety of possible meanings which are ascribable to *li*. As we can see from the previous lists, *li* has a large number of possible definitions. However, these seem to be reducible to five general families of meanings, which we will distinguish into the following five groups:

- li*₁ Given an expression such as "Y is *li* X," one possible sense suggested by the most common dictionary definitions could be expressed by saying that Y is divided off from X, or that Y is apart from X, or that Y has abandoned X.

In other words, some distance has been put between oneself and X. This is the sense in which one would separate himself from bad company which provides a poor atmosphere for spiritual cultivation. Consequently, Y would simply avoid encountering X's, and there is no implication concerning the existence or non-existence of the X's.

- li*₂ This *li* would indicate that Y remains while X no longer exists, i.e. that X becomes non-existent for Y, or X has disappeared for Y; Things like X no longer arise within Y according to *li*₂. Consequently, if one were *li*₂ anger (or hatred, *dosa*) or *li*₂ illusion (*moha*), this sense would seem to imply that anger no longer arises within Y, or that illusion had been eliminated within Y. This sense of *li* clearly implies that X no longer exists.

- li*₃ A third more complex sense is "Y is independent of X and X is not essentially related to Y." This suggests that Y is somehow and in some sense "more fundamental than" X, and that X is merely adventitious.

Whether X exists or not, Y would remain untouched, untroubled, and unaffected by X.

This sense might be best captured by saying that Y transcends X. As with *li*₁, this use of *li* has no implications concerning the non-existence of X, for the claim would amount to the assertion that

even if X exists, it can have no essential connection or influence upon Y.

- li*₄ A fourth possible sense for *li* could include a state of mental detachment which Y takes towards X.

This implies that Y is not attached to X (or things like X), that Y can move freely among X's without being either attracted towards them or repelled by them.

Here, *li* describes an attitude towards X and has no implications concerning the non-existence of X.

- li*₅ This last possible interpretation of *li* would mean that "X cannot reach to Y."

It might even be interpreted in a philosophical manner as the claim that Y belongs to an entirely different category than X. This sense of *li* might be interpreted as a drawing out of the combined positions of *li*₁ and *li*₃.

It would seem that the relationship between Y and X might be any one of the above five, and still be the relationship of "Y *li* X." It is clear that these five are by no means identical; different relationships are implied depending upon which sense of *li* is intended. And, differing philosophical consequences can be drawn depending upon which *li* is adopted in the mind of the reader or translator.

In light of the sense distinguished above, let us see how the sense of the phrase *hsin-t'i li nien* shifts depending upon which of the five senses of *li* are adopted:

- li*₁ The mind itself has abandoned (or rejected) thinking;
The mind itself has separated itself from thinking.
- li*₂ [In] the mind itself, thinking does not arise;
[In] the mind itself, there is no thinking.
- li*₃ The mind itself is fundamentally and essentially independent of thinking;
The mind itself transcends thinking.
- li*₄ The mind itself is mentally detached from thinking;
The mind itself has an attitude of detachment towards thinking.
- li*₅ The mind itself is beyond conceptualization;
The mind itself is inconceivable.⁷

Which of these five provides the most likely understanding of the

phrase *hsin-t'i li nien*? The step we must take in order to answer this question is to examine the way the term *li* is used in varying contexts in the writings of the Northern Ch'an line. This we will do next.

PART IV: CONCERNING THE USE OF 'LI' IN THE NORTHERN CH'AN TEXTS

We shall begin by making two general observations about the way *li* is used in the existent texts of the Northern Ch'an line.⁸ First, we might notice that *li* is generally used to establish a relationship rather than used in isolation. E.g., the most common use of *li* is in expressions which we might translate "free from" or "liberated from" rather than "freedom" or "liberation."⁹ Secondly, we should call attention to the fact that passages involving *li* in the writings of the Northern line generally take two basic forms;

- (A) Y is *li* X;
- (B) To be *li* X is to be Z.

We shall proceed with our analysis of *li* by selecting a number of typical passages involving *li*, being careful not to omit any types, and then examine these to see how *li* is employed. Sometimes we shall paraphrase the originals (without distorting them) in order to shorten their length, and in order to reveal their basic structure. Although the total number of appearances of *li* in the writings of the Northern line certainly numbers in the hundreds, the general structure of the passages tends to be quite similar, and often identical. For this reason we do not feel it to be either practical or necessary to provide an exhaustive list of such passages. But we have tried to make the following list comprehensive in the sense that all significant appearances of *li* might be included under one or more of the following fourteen passages.

Group A: Y is *li* X.

1. The Buddha-mind is *li* being and non-being 佛心清淨離有離無 (T. 2834, p. 1273c19).
2. The mind itself is *li* thinking 心體離念 (T. 2834, p. 1273c22).
3. The Bodhisattva is *li* the defilements of desire, anger, and false views 是菩薩即離諸貪欲瞋恚邪見 (T. 2834, 1276a2).
4. The mind being *li* attachments, the mind has attained liberation. Form (*rūpa*) being *li* attachments, form has attained liberation. 不思心如心離繫縛 (T. 2834, p. 1277a25).
5. One can be totally *li* all suffering and experience Nirvana 遂能遠離諸苦 (T. 2009, p. 367a4).
6. Control the mind and you will be *li* falsehood and evil 但能攝心離諸邪惡 (T. 2833, p. 1271a11).

7. . . . when the mind is *li* thinking, objective conditions are pure and clear 念境塵清淨 (T. 2834, p. 1274b3).
8. The Tathagata is forever *li* the worldly and [*li*] suffering 永離世間一切諸苦 (T. 2833, p. 1271c5).
9. Not to bring forth the mind of conceptualization and description is to be *li* attachments and fetters, and is the achievement of liberation 不起心思議則離繫縛即得解脫 (T. 2834, p. 1277b19).

Group B: To be *li* X is to be Z.

10. That which is *li* thinking is called the 'essence' 離念名體 (T. 2834, p. 1274b5).
11. Obtaining *li* arrogance, arrogance does not arise 慢則不生從此戒上得離增上慢 (T. 2834, 1276c2).
12. To be *li* mind is called 'Self Awakening.'
To be *li* form is 'Awakening Others.'
To have mind and form both *li* is 'Awakening Perfected.'
離心名自覺 離色名覺他 心色俱離 名覺滿滿者 (T. 2839, p. 1291c28).
13. To be *li* thinking is called 'Intrinsic Awakening'
To be *li* form is called 'Initial Awakening.' 離念名本覺色名始覺 (T. 2839, p. 1292b2).
14. *Li* mind, names do not appear.
Li forms, characteristics do not arise 離心名不起 離色相不生 (T. 2839, p. 1292b16).

Statements of the form of #12, #13 and #14 are very common in the writings of the Northern line. The majority of the appearances of *li* are precisely in this kind of construction, where *li* is used with any pair or any triad of Buddhist concepts and technical terms. It ultimately seems to take on the suggestion of a literary convention rather than serving as the reflection of an experiential insight of Ch'an.

PART V: ANALYSIS OF THE VARIOUS POSSIBILITIES

We have distinguished five different ways in which Y can be *li* X. Which of these provides the most likely way of understanding the expression *hsin-t'i li nien*? To answer this question, we will utilize the method outlined at the beginning of this paper, i.e. examining the various passages involving *li* to see if any one of the *li* previously distinguished "works" in a significant majority of the passages from the Northern texts. We shall use as our key the fourteen passages given on page 10.

Substituting *li*₁ ("apart from," "separated from," etc.) in the typical

passages, we find that it is very clear in all of those passages which speak of being *li* from negative sorts of objects, such as the *kleśas*, illusions, attachments, falsehood, craving, evil, etc.¹⁰ It is not clear what it means in the context of mind and form, and in phrase such as “The Buddha-mind is *li* being and non-being” (T. 2834, 1273c19). This passage could be interpreted as saying that both being and non-being are separated from the Buddha, which could imply a ‘third realm’ where the Buddha-mind exists apart from the world of existence and non-existence. However, “separated from” works quite well as long as we interpret the phrase as follows: “The Buddha-mind is separated from [the *concepts* of] being and non-being.” This sort of interpretation would seem justified within the parameters of Mahāyāna thought. Consequently we may conclude that *li*₁ can be used consistently in the passages to give good sense to them.

*Li*₂ is similar to *li*₂, except it is much stronger than *li*₁ because the object of *li* is understood to be or to become non-existent. Consequently, if *li*₂ can be seen to work well in the passages, it can be preferred over *li*₁ because it will include the senses of *li*₁ as its own additional implications. This way of understanding *li* works very well in those passages involving negative elements, but has the somewhat troublesome consequence that the Bodhisattva becomes one who can *never* experience anger or passions since those elements are now totally absent from his personality (although, there are some scholars who might well agree that this is exactly the case). *Li*₂ certainly is a convenient way of interpreting a passage like “control the mind and you will be *li* falsehood and evil,” for it becomes, “control the mind and falsehood and evil will no longer exist [within you].” (T. 2833, 1271all). However, we seem forced to adopt the conclusion that the process of thinking must be separated from the mind itself, which implies that the enlightened person simply does not think after he is enlightened. Was the Northern line really arguing that the mind itself is operating in an enlightened manner when all thinking had come to an end?¹¹ This position does not seem inconsistent with some of the various Buddha-nature theories expounded in such texts as the *Nirvāṇa Sutra*, the *Awakening of Faith*, and others which were important within the Northern tradition. If *hsin-t’i* is equated with the Buddha-nature, or with the *Tathāgatagarbha*, this position does not seem unjustified.

Li is the interpretation that the mind itself “transcends” thinking, in that the mind itself is the fundamental essence, and thinking is just

adventitious (and perhaps an adventitious defilement).¹² Here the image is that of the original tranquil mind which remains undisturbed whether there is thinking or not. According to this view, even when one's thoughts are disturbed or agitated, the mind itself would be unaffected by this activity since it is not essentially related to thought, and the thought-process cannot affect this fundamental tranquility of mind. The mind itself is thus pure and clear, and independent of thinking.

This interpretation of *li* becomes very troublesome when we try to utilize it in the various sample phrases and passages. For example, it becomes very difficult to understand any passage of an "if . . . then . . ." type of structure. The characteristic of being "more fundamental than" or "independent of" must be true all the time, and not only when something else is first accomplished. For example, consider the passage [if] you control your mind, then you will be *li* falsehood and evil." It becomes, "[if] you control your mind, then you [the person, mentally considered] will be 'more fundamental than and essentially separate from' falsehood and evil" (T. 2833, 1217all). But this interpretation of *li* would require us to say that we are *always* essentially separate from falsehood and evil, whether we realize it or not. All passages which speak of achieving the state of separation would become very difficult to understand (since it is already there originally). E.g., what sense is there to saying ". . . when the mind is *li* thinking, objective conditions are pure and clear" (T. 2834, 1274b3) if the mind is already and forever *li* thinking? Consequently, although *li*₃ seems to give good sense within the specific context of *hsin-t'i li nien*, it becomes rather problematic when we try to substitute this *li*₃ uniformly in the various other appearances of *li* in the Northern writings.

*Li*₄, "an attitude of mental detachment," sounds rather good in our key phrase *hsin-t'i li nien* ("the mind itself has an attitude of mental detachment towards thinking"), but seems to be too weak in some of the other passages. For example, "the Bodhisattva is *li* the defilements of desire, anger, and false views" (T. 2834, 1276a2) would become: "the Bodhisattva has an attitude of mental detachment towards the defilements of desire, anger, and false views." This seems to imply that false views (*moha*) might persist as long as the Bodhisattva maintained an attitude of mental detachment towards his false views. But don't we feel a desire to say that the Bodhisattva has actually *eliminated* all false views? Can one be a Bodhisattva (on one of the higher *bhūmi*) and still have false views?

There are at least two ways of responding to this objection. The first would be to interpret the meaning as follows: the Bodhisattva learns to utilize language forms (which incorporate false views almost by definition for the Mādhyamika, as does the general thinking process), but the Bodhisattva is able to manipulate language without falling into the trap of taking the terms as standing in a one-to-one relationship mapping a world composed of self-existent things (naive realist view), or of self-existent ultimate 'bits' (*dharmas*) (the view ascribed to the Abhidharma schools). In this case the Bodhisattva could be described as being detached from his false views. This analysis is slightly awkward however when we consider that false views would no longer be false views if one were not attached to them. In addition, it would still seem possible for the Bodhisattva to become genuinely angry (*dosa*) or to be genuinely filled with desire if one were merely cultivating an attitude of nonattachment towards these 'Three Poisons.' Is this possible for a Bodhisattva, or is his anger and desire merely *upāya*, an *apparent* display of these emotions as an expedient for bringing others to full and complete Enlightenment?

A second way of responding to the objection (that *li*₄ is too weak for the majority of appearances of *li*) is to argue that by taking the attitude of non-attachment towards these 'Three Poisons,' these destructive states are (indirectly and gradually) removed. Consequently, the attitude of non-attachment could be interpreted as a process which ultimately results in the total elimination of the negative elements.

In addition, when we consider that *li* is given as a synonym for 'Awakening' (*chueh* 覺) quite often (e.g. T. 2839, 1291c23), one might well feel that the characteristic of non-attachment is one of the defining characteristics of Awakening and Buddhahood. In this kind of context, *li*₁ and *li*₂ do not seem as likely as either *li*₃ or *li*₄.

A passage from the Northern texts discusses *li* and the Three Poisons as follows:

If there is *li* mind, craving does not arise.

If there is *li* form, anger does not arise.

And if both form and mind are *li*, folly and ignorance are not manifested.

If there is *li* mind, one transcends the realm of desire.

If there is *li* form, one transcends the realm of form.

And if both are *li*, one transcends the formless realm.

(T. 2839, 1292b4).

This passage makes it clear that this is a state to be achieved through a sequential process, and thus makes very good sense when understood in the *li*₄ manner. i.e., by progressively cultivating an attitude of detachment, one begins to think in a detached manner—craving does not arise, anger does not arise (since one is now detached from physical forms), and false views are no longer manifested.

However, it seems that there is one very strong difficulty with adopting the *li*₄ interpretation: the Chinese grammar does not seem to support it. On the interpretation of *li*₄, *hsin-t'i li nien* (心體離念) is understood as a description of *how* one thinks (or ought to think), i.e. *li* would be telling us about the proper relationship between the process of thinking and the things thought about (between thinking and the world). But the Chinese construction suggests instead that *li* is telling us about the relationship between the mind itself and thinking. We seem to have three elements here: (a) the mind itself; (b) thinking; (c) the world. The interpretation of *li*₄ given above seems to suggest that *li* is telling us about the relationship between (b) and (c). The Chinese grammatical structure seems to suggest that the relationship is actually between (a) and (b).

Another way that we might understand “X is *li* Y” in the phrase *hsin-t'i li nien* is provided by *li*₅. Stated briefly, it is the interpretation that the mind itself is inconceivable (*acintya*). In other words, *li nien* is taken as a description of the nature of the mind itself, and would become equivalent to the popular phrase used often in the Northern texts, *pu-ssu-i* (不思議). We could say that “the mind itself is beyond conceptualization.” In this interpretation, *li nien* could be paraphrased as “in a totally different category from thinking,” or “beyond the reach of thinking (or thought).” This does provide us with a rather profound interpretation of the various appearances of *li*, except for those cases involving a “when . . .” or “if . . . then . . .” structure, as with *li*₃. In addition, this view would seem to involve us in a rather dualistic universe filled with defilements, and having Bodhisattvas who are somehow “beyond the reach of” these defiled things. Some of the other *li* also seem to border upon a dualistic stance.

PART VI: WHAT IS THE MOST LIKELY WAY OF INTERPRETING *hsin-t'i li nien*?

As the previous discussion makes clear, it does not seem possible to arrive at a conclusive statement of precisely which *li* was in the mind of the authors of the Northern texts. However, on the basis of our analysis

of the various implications of the positions, we do seem justified in trying to determine which senses are most likely in view of the available evidence. We can also pursue some of the further implications which would follow if *li* were being used in more than one sense by the authors of the writings.

*Li*₂ can be seen as a reasonable way of interpreting *hsin-t'i li nien*, in light of the fact that it gives a clear meaning for every appearance of *li* and it does not seem to contradict any of the other teachings of the Northern line. We would then interpret *hsin-t'i li nien* as follows: "[In] the mind itself, thinking does not arise." We can summarize the reasons which support this interpretation as follows:

1. *Li*₂ gives a likely and consistent interpretation to all the various appearances of *li* in the Northern writings.
2. No other *li* can be used more consistently and more often in the passages.
3. *Li*₂ has the additional value of including *li*₁ and its senses.
4. *Li*₂ would seem to provide a meaning which is acceptable in light of the 'pure mind' theory of Buddha-nature (*Tathāgatagarbha*).
5. We know that one interpretation of 'concentration' (*ting* 定) in China did involve suppressing thoughts, and this is consistent with the kinds of criticisms leveled against the Northern line in the *Platform Scripture* attributed to Hui-neng, and by Shen-hui.

However, in spite of the above points, there seem to be good reasons for supporting *li*₄ ("an attitude of mental detachment") as a suitable way to interpret *hsin-t'i li nien*. *Li*₄ is particularly easy to defend if we understand the sense of detachment as something which ultimately eliminates the negative elements, i.e., a process which ultimately results in the removal of the destructive states of mind (the "Three Poisons" for example). In this way, *li*₂ would include much of the strength of *li*₄. On some occasions we may feel that *li*₄ is too weak because it seems to imply that the negative state (of arrogance, hatred, desire, illusion, etc.) could persist even though the attitude of detachment was present. We suggested that this could be solved if we understand the state of non-attachment as producing the gradual extinction or elimination of the negative elements (e.g., being detached from one's arrogance ultimately eliminates such arrogance). The major difficulty with accepting *li*₄ is that the Chinese grammar seems to make such an interpretation rather forced.

To adopt either *li*₃ or *li*₅ would require us to hold that *li* is varying

considerably from one sort of context to another, as pointed out in our previous analysis on pages 134–135). We do not seem to be able to substitute either *li*₃ (“The mind itself *transcends* thinking”) or *li*₅ (“The mind itself is *beyond* conceivability”) into the other passages involving *li*. It would seem difficult to document the claim that *li* has a rather unique sense only in the context of *hsin-t’i li nien*, but there is no question that it is possible.

The authors of the writings may have used *li* either (1) ambiguously (in one sense in one passage, and in a different sense in another place), or (2) unclearly (not really aware that varying that varying senses were involved in different contexts). As for the first possibility, if the authors were using the character ambiguously, then our method of determining which sense of *li* gives the best possible meaning in the largest number of cases would not give us any information about any particular case, such as *hsin-t’i li nien*. Instead we would have to restrict ourselves to the few passages which deal only with the notion of *li nien*. Unfortunately the remarks concerning *li nien* in the texts of Northern Ch’an (during the earliest period) do not seem detailed enough to allow one to come to any real conclusive opinion. And as for (2), if the authors were simply utilizing the concept in an unclear manner, then all attempts to draw out consistent philosophical consequences are bound to fail, because there was no original coherence in the varying usages.

We see no way to rule out either of these two possibilities. Our analysis so far has been inconclusive, and one might argue that it has been inconclusive precisely because the texts themselves are not of the sort to which one can apply the standards of consistency required for a precise philosophical analysis.

So, what may we conclude? Attempting to explicate a precise meaning for *hsin-t’i li nien*, which we tentatively translated as “the mind itself is free from thinking,” we have come to four possible conclusions:

- (a) The precise meaning of the phrase is:
[In] the mind itself, thinking does not arise.
- (b) The precise meaning of the phrase is:
The mind itself is detached while thinking.
- (c) The precise meaning of the phrase is unique to that context alone and involves a sense of *li* which can be made explicit as: either
The mind itself transcends thinking,
or
The mind itself is inconceivable.

- (d) The sense of *li* is ambiguous or unclear, and the passage cannot be made explicit based upon the evidence available.

On the evidence available, we do not believe that it is possible to establish that only one of the above possibilities is correct, and that the other three must be wrong. Considering only the various appearances of *li* in the writings of the Northern line, (a) seems to be most strongly indicated. However, we have found no evidence which would rule out (b), (c) or (d).¹⁷

PART VII: 'LI' AND THE SPLIT BETWEEN THE TWO CH'AN TRADITIONS

As has become rather obvious by now, the adoption of the sense "does not arise" or "separated from" for *li* would provide a picture of Northern Ch'an doctrines which would seem to at least partly explain some of the criticisms of the Southern line found in the writings of Shen-hui, the critical remarks found in the *Platform Scripture*, and in other texts such as the *Lin-chi lu* (*Rinzai roku*).¹³ If the second sense is adopted, then *li nien* can be seen to be similar to the essential concept of the Southern line, that of *wu-nien* (無念).¹⁴ If this were the case, one would have to look elsewhere for possible doctrinal or philosophical differences.

If we recognize that there are several different ways in which the mind itself can be "free from thinking," we can see that different philosophical consequences do follow from the varying possibilities. Recognizing this, and also noticing that the Northern line applied negative terms to thinking and thought-related activities, we are in a better position to understand that the critic might understand *li* in the first sense which implies that the goal to be pursued is the elimination of thinking from the mind by consciously stopping the arising of thoughts. Such a doctrine can justifiably be called "an obstacle to Bodhi," as Ho-tsê Shen-hui charged so often.¹⁵ The philosophy of the Northern line would be interpreted as the position of those who believed that by consciously making one's mind blank, eliminating mental activity ("thinking"), one thereby allows the pure and self-illuminated mind to shine forth. In other words, by consciously stopping the arising of thought, the mirror-like clarity of the mind is restored and it becomes perfectly reflecting in the same way the pond becomes mirror-like when the waves are stopped. The adventitiously defiling process of thinking¹⁶ is eliminated or "wiped away."

Whether such an interpretation of the thought of Northern Ch'an was a forced and deliberate misrepresentation is difficult to ascertain. Our

own analysis has tended to show that the texts themselves do not make such an interpretation impossible. The evidence presented above opens the possibility that Shen-hui need not be understood as motivated solely by political aspirations in his criticisms of the Northern line. The Northern line might have intended such a dualistic position, or its position may have been simply misunderstood because of the technical terms which they employed (i.e., *li*).

On the other hand, *li* can also be understood in some other ways which do not have the same consequences as outlined above. If it is taken as simply recommending that an attitude of non-attachment be maintained in the thinking process, e.g., that one think in a *li*-like manner, or that one think without being attached to the objects thought about, or to think without imputing a *svabhāva* (unchanging essential self-existent nature) to the objects which constitute the world, then the picture changes considerably. This would seem to be equivalent to seeing the world as *śūnyatā*. It entirely avoids the dualistic separation between the pure mind and defiling processes of thinking. If this sense is adopted, then we would have to look somewhere other than *li nien* to see if Shen-hui's attacks were justified.

Adopting possibility (c) also seems to avoid Shen-hui's criticisms. However, the claim that "the mind itself transcends thinking" could be understood in a rather dualistic sense again, and Shen-hui seems to have had a strong aversion to any formulations of the doctrines which could even be misinterpreted in this way. Shen-hui vigorously attacked all dualisms in the spirit of the *Vajracchedikā* and other Prajñāpāramitā texts.

Possibility (d), that the authors of the texts were not completely clear themselves about the varying senses of *li*, once again makes room for the criticisms offered by the Southern line.

What was the actual position of the Northern tradition? The most sympathetic reading would obviously be (b) or (c), that we must think non-attachedly, or that the true mind cannot be conceptualized. If the Northern line did hold a doctrine like (a) with possible dualistic consequences, it is very unlikely that the dualistic conclusions were explicitly intended. It is possible that the Northern line did intend a view which would justify Shen-hui's criticisms, however, in light of the later development of the doctrines, this seems very unlikely.¹⁷ Yet the earliest formulations of the teachings of the Northern line does seem to make possible a dualistic view. Ho-tse Shen-hui of the Southern line may well have misinterpreted the teachings of the Northern line on this point, but I do not feel that we must conclude that it was a deliberate misrepresen-

tation. The texts themselves do not contradict such an interpretation, as we have seen.

NOTES

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¹ For our sources, we will draw upon those Northern Ch'an texts preserved in volume 85 of the Taishō collection, and also collected in Ui Hakuju, *Zenshūshi kenkyū*, vol. I, Tokyo, 1940, pp. 419–517, and in Suzuki Daisetz, *Suzuki Daisetsu zenshū*, vol. III, Tokyo, 1968, pp. 161–235. Because this paper is primarily concerned with the conflict between Shen-hui and the Northern lineage established by Shen-shiu, we have omitted from consideration those texts which because of colophon and contents seem to be a considerably later development within the Northern line.

² This expression originally appeared in the *Awakening of Faith in the Mahayana* (*Ta-ch'eng ch'i-hsin lun*), T. 1666, vol. 32, p. 576b12. Hakeda translates the passage "the essence of Mind is free from thoughts" (Hakeda, *The Awakening of Faith*, Columbia, 1967, p. 37). Quotations and paraphrases of this phrase are found throughout the writings of the Northern line. E.g., T. 2834, p. 1273c12, 1274a5, 1274a19, 1274b3–5, T. 2839, p. 1292c23, 1292a26, 1292b1, 1292b14, etc.

³ Although it is very possible that *li* is used in an unusual and unique sense only in the *hsin-i'i li nien* passage, and differently everywhere else, it would seem difficult to document this claim. It will be clear that certain of the possible ways of interpreting *li* can be excluded by the context of the passages, but most often there will be more than one sense of *li* which is possible for interpreting the passages in question. Therefore, although we will be able to exclude some possible meanings for *li*, the author does not expect to be able to establish conclusively that one single sense of *li* must be the one and only correct way to understand *li*, the only correct possibility.

⁴ The following definitions of *li* were basically drawn from two sources: Nakamura Hajime, *Bukkyōgo daijiten*, 3 vols., Tokyo, 1975, p. 1415a-b; Soothill, *Dictionary of Chinese Buddhist Terms*, Taiwan, 1969, p. 475.

⁵ These definitions were basically drawn from the following sources: Mathews *Chinese-English Dictionary*, entry 3902; Nelson's *Japanese-English Character Dictionary* (entry 5040); Kenkyusha's *New Japanese-English Dictionary*, p. 382.

⁶ This rather long list was compiled from just two sources: Nagao, *Index to the the Mahāyāna-sūtrālamkāra*, Tokyo, 1961, p. 264a; Nakamura Hajime, *op. cit.*, p. 1415a-b.

⁷ The author is indebted to Dr. David Chappell who pointed out that this sense was separable from *li*₃.

⁸ The Northern Ch'an texts utilized in this examination are the following:

- (1) *Ta ch'eng wu sheng fang pien wen* (大乘無生方便門, "Mahāyāna Non-arising Upāya Doctrines," T. 2834;
- (2) *Kuan hsin lun* (觀心論), "Clear Observation of Mind," T. 2833;
- (3) *Ts'an Ch'an wen* (讚禪門詩), "Verses in Praise of Ch'an" [not the original title of the text], T. 2839;
- (4) *Ta ch'eng wu sheng fang pien—pei tsung* (大乘五方便北宗, "Mahayana Five Upāya—Northern lineage," not found in the Taishō 85 but collected in Ui, *op. cit.*, pp. 468–515 and in Suzuki, *op. cit.*, pp. 190–235. However, because of the obvious late stage of development of this text, we have purposely not drawn any of our sample passages from it.

The above list is not a complete list of the writings of the Northern line of Ch'an, but the ones omitted do not discuss *li nien*.

⁹ There are exceptions to this, as in the *Ts'an Ch'an wen shih*, where we find expressions such as the following:

Awakening is *li*, and *li* is "*li* thinking." . . . Forms and mind are both *li*.

The text clearly suggests that *li* is to be understood as an abbreviation for (or as equivalent to) *li nien*.

If we substitute the English expression "free from" for *li*, we would have:

Awakening is freedom. Freedom is [to be] free from thinking.

. . . Forms and mind are both free. (T. 2839 p. 1291c23).

¹⁰ When we examine the kinds of passages in which *li* appears, we note that most often *li* is used with definitely negative elements, such as defilements, the Three Poisons of *moha*, *dosa*, and *rāga*, attachments, suffering (*duḥkha*), falsehood, evil, arrogance, fetters, etc. It also appears with elements which we might be inclined to call neutral, such as being and non-being, mind, and form. We do not find *li* used in connection with positive elements like Awakening or Nirvana. Part of the question which we are dealing with in this paper is whether 'thinking' ought to be classified with the negative elements, or with the neutral elements (One could also argue that the elements which we have classified as neutral are actually negative as well, in one way or another).

¹¹ A further complication of this issue concerns the exact nature of this 'thinking' (*nien* 念) for the Northern line. We can easily maintain the position suggested in this interpretation if we assume that by *nien* the Northern line actually meant *Wang nien* (妄念). I.e., they are arguing against 'incorrect' or 'wrong' thinking and not just the general process of thinking. I have found nothing in the Northern texts which would suggest that this is how *nien* was to be understood, but neither have I found anything which would eliminate this possibility. There are no discussions which clearly distinguish 'correct thinking' from 'incorrect thinking.' Clearly, a complete analysis of *hsin-t'i li-nien* would require corresponding analysis of each of the terms involved and not just *li*.

¹² There are numerous passages in the Northern writings which speak very negatively of thinking, and which would lead us to interpret the thinking process as a difilement in some sense. Some of these passages are translated in footnote 16, related to our discussion of this issue in terms of the conflict between the two lines of Ch'an.

¹³ *Lin-chi lu*, T. vol. 47, p. 499b13.

¹⁴ I do not want to suggest that the previous discussion of *li nien* exhausts the meaning of *wu-nein* ("no-thought") as taught in the lineage of Hui-neng and Shen-hui. However it does seem that at least a portion of what is meant by *wu-nien* is encompassed by *li nien* if *li* is interpreted as "maintaining an attitude of non-attachment."

¹⁵ The majority of Shen-hui's criticisms of the Northern line are found in his "Establishing the True and False according to the Southern School of Bodhidharma," and to a lesser extent in his other works. The principal source for Shen-hui's ideas is Hu Shih, *Shen hui ho shang i chi*, Taiwan, 1971; pp. 133-4, 137, 288 and 289 are places where the criticism is especially strong.

¹⁶ There are numerous passages which support the idea that thinking is considered negative and defiling. For example, "The minds of the *śrāvakas* have thinking and grasping, and they are disturbed and agitated . . ." (Ui, *op. cit.*, p. 460). Consider also, "They have minds of thinking and seeking, and so are unable to know . . ." (Ui, *op. cit.*, p. 462). We see it clearly also in the following longer passage:

To bring forth (to have the arising of) the mind of conceptualization and description is to be fettered and not achieve liberation. Not to bring forth the mind of conceptualization and description is to be free from (*li*) the attachments and fetters, and is the achievement of liberation. No conceptualization in the mind, mind is Suchness . . . (*Ibid.*, p. 465).

¹⁷ It is important to notice that this claim is made in reference to what seem to be the very earliest texts of the Northern line. The Northern texts were continually being revised and rewritten over the course of approximately one hundred years following the death of the founder of the Northern tradition, Shen-hsiu, in 706. We have tried to restrict our discussion to those texts which express the level of thought with which Ho-tse Shen-hui might be reasonably expected to be familiar. According to the biographical entry on Shen-hui given by Tsung-mi (*Yuan-chüeh chin ta shu ch'ao*, Zokuzokyo 14, 277a), Shen-hui studied under the founder of the Northern line for three years between 697-701. If this is the case, then we might expect that all of Shen-hui's discussions of the teachings of the Northern line were based upon the doctrines of the teachers during this period. He apparently was also familiar with second-hand reports concerning their teachings prior to 732. As we see the Northern texts become longer and more detailed, the temptation to interpret their doctrines dualistically becomes less strong. This is particularly true with what appears to be the final development of the "Five Upāya" series of texts, the *Ta ch'eng wu fang pien: pei-tsung*, in Ui, *op. cit.*, pp. 468-515. This text carries a colophon dated 787 which places it up to 80 years following Shen-hui's initial encounter with the teachings of the Northern line. In this fully developed text all references which might suggest such a dualistic interpretation are explained in sufficient length and detail to make such an interpretation very unlikely. In fact, some passages from this text sound almost like paraphrases of the teaching of the Southern line of Shen-hui. This raises the interesting question of whether the Northern line might have incorporated portions of the teachings of the South in order to avoid their criticisms (or misinterpretations). This is a topic which I would like to explore more fully at a later date.