

LIBERATION IN ACTION: CHAN IDEALS OF RESPONSIVE VIRTUOSITY

While the Tiantai, Huayan and Pure Land schools of Buddhism were all indigenous Chinese traditions, they were based on inherited South/Central Asian texts. In contrast, the Chan lineage (禪宗) is explicitly defined itself as based on:

- a shift from foreign texts to indigenous teachings
- a shift from teachings as given in texts to teachings as improvised relationships
- a shift from the central authority of Shakyamuni Buddha to live, “homegrown” buddhas

To illustrate: Vimalakīrti and the “Family of the Tathāgatas” and the “fox kōan” (*gong’an*) of Baizhang (749-814)

- pivotal teaching: the liberated do not obscure/suppress karma: *bumei yinguo* 不昧因果

By the early Song dynasty, Chan depicted this shift as a “revolutionary” return to the *shared realization* acknowledged in the look exchanged by the Buddha and Mahākāśyapa.

- a moment of demonstrating:
 - A special transmission outside the scriptures (*jiaowai biechuan*; 教外別傳);
 - Not established upon words and letters (*buli wenzi*; 不立文字);
 - Directly pointing to the human heartmind (*zhizhi renxin*; 直指人心);
 - Seeing nature and becoming a Buddha (*jianxing chengfo*; 見性成佛).

As Chan lineage constructions would have it, from Mahākāśyapa down to the present, there has been an unbroken sequence of **silent** “heartmind-to-heartmind” transmissions. But, as already noted, this neat, “master narrative” began to be undercut in the late 20th century and by the 1990s the consensus was that the Tang “golden age” of Chan was a Song fabrication. (McRae, “seeing through Zen”). More recently, alternative documentation from, e.g., memorial stele, non-Buddhist texts, has led to a partial, revalidation of iconoclastic Tang dynasty Chan (Jia Jinhua).

- but core issue: was the traditional history ever meant to be *descriptive* or was it always quite consciously *normative*?

I. Chan: The Authority of Appreciative and Contributory Virtuosity

While Chan (transliteration of *dhyāna*) was often referred to as the “Meditation School,” meditation masters were major category for classifying monks from the late Han.

- indeed, the Chinese classic text on meditation, “The Great Calming and Contemplation” *Mohe Zhiguan* 摩訶止觀, was written by Tiantai master Zhiyi (538-97) who identifies the traditional Buddhist meditation techniques of calming (*śamatha*) *zhi* 止 and insight (*vipāśyanā*) *guan* 觀 with sitting meditation (*zuochan* 坐禪) and wisdom (*zhihui* 智慧)
- if *zhiguan* put into practice (*xingyong* 行用) across all six senses and in all six modes of bodily conduct (walking, standing, sitting, lying down, speaking and movement in general), one naturally “passes through all causal conditions, properly according with circumstances” (*liyuan duijing* 歷緣對境)

In keeping with this, emerging over the 6th to 9th centuries, Chan identified meditation with the embodied demonstration of relational virtuosity: the live expression of *upāya* and *Buddha-nature*.

The traditional Chan narrative pivots on Bodhidharma's arrival from India in late 5th to early 6th century—the 28th in line from Buddha—and his encounter with a local ruler. He is adopted as a symbol of unwavering meditative focus who advocates entering Buddhism via *li* 理 (informing condition/reason) and *xing* 行 (practice/conduct):

- *li*: all sentient beings have the same true nature
- *xing*: make good on wrongs done; correspond with conditions; seek nothing; tally actions with the Dharma (all natures are pure)

In Dunhuang texts from mid-8th century, we find recorded letters, lectures and dialogues featuring Bodhidharma and his circle that presage core elements of mature (Song dynasty) Chan:

- “wherever you’re walking, lying, sitting or standing is the place of enlightenment; wherever you pick up your feet or put them down—that is the place of enlightenment!” (BA 36)
- “The *qi* of those attaining realization through the medium of written words is weak; those attaining realization from their own circumstances and events have robust *qi*. Seeing the Dharma in the medium of events means never losing mindfulness anywhere.” (BA 20)
 - this is sending mind “outside the boundaries of the norms”
- “it is unnecessary to reject samsara for it to begin to be nirvana, just as it is unnecessary to reject a chunk of ice for it to begin to be water” (BA 29)
- legend: departs to return to India and allows that Daofu received the skin (non-attachment to words/letters), Nun Zongzhi the flesh (seeing realm of Akshobhya Buddha once and never again), Daoyu the bone (4 elements empty, skandhas don’t exist), and Huike (a silent bow) the marrow of his teaching

At about the same time that these texts are being copied in Dunhuang, in and near the imperial capital, Chan is undergoing a decisive transformation, centered on debates about whether the means to realizing “consummate Chan personhood” are “gradual” or “sudden.”

Huineng (638-713): The (Preeminent) Local Boy and the home-cooked *Platform Sutra*

Establishing Huineng's roots in soil of China as illiterate, orphaned, manual laborer—a “commoner”—who ends up a layman pitted against the ordained “sage” Shenxiu, a highly educated friend of elite society. Huineng hears Diamond Sutra and embarks on practice under a nun, then goes to Hongren's temple and is first rejected as an uncouth “southerner”, but retorts that “in Buddha-nature neither nor north nor south.” After 9 months: transmission challenge.

Huineng hits Shenxiu's dualism-invoking verse:

The body is the Bodhi tree.
The mind is like a clear mirror.
Always strive to polish it,
And never let dust collect.

Bodhi has no tree;
the clear and bright mirror has no support;
Buddha nature is constantly purifying and clearing;
Where could there be dust?

Contra *authority of experience* or the *authority of texts*, the *authority of praxis*: “It is precisely Buddhist practice/conduct that is Buddha.” This means, “At all times whether walking, standing, sitting, or lying down, continually conduct yourself with authentic heart-mind (*zhenxin* 真心).”

- authentic heart-mind “is not sitting in quiescence or casting aside delusion and letting nothing arise in the mind—that is insentienty! An obstruction of *dao*!” (PS 14)
 - meditation is not a means to the end of wisdom; meditation is **embodying** (*ti* 體) wisdom, wisdom is the **function** (*yong* 用) of embodiment [not a sequence] (PS 13)
 - *zhihui* 智慧/惠 understanding/kindness vs *asravas* polluting inflows/outflows
 - key: “seeing our own nature” = seeing that it is constantly enlightening
 - *xing* 性 as relational dispositions or propensities, not an “essence”
- *dunwu* 頓悟: “sudden enlightenment” versus “readiness to awaken” or “readiness for awakening”...not about how fast, but with what quality of commitment
 - seen slowly, the Dharma is gradual, seen quickly it is sudden; Dharma is without gradual and sudden, but some people are dull and others keen (PS 39)
 - *wunian* 無念 or “without thinking” is the ancestral teaching; *wuxiang* 無相 or “without characteristics” is the body (*ti*); *wuzhu* 無依 or “non-abiding” is the root
 - where *wunian* is being without thoughts even in the midst of thinking... (PS 17)

Mazu (709-88): “shock tactics” and the radical presence of “ordinary heartmind is Buddha” *pingchang xin* 平常心—taking “no fixed position” as method.

Practicing in Sichuan with advocates of radical spontaneity criticized for rootless non-duality, he becomes disenchanted, departs, meets Nanyue Huairang (677-744)→tile event

- seeing the path versus seeing *from* the path—*oneness with our situation as it is, directed toward liberation*
 - enlightenment as destination yields to enlightening direction
- Chan meditation is not about sitting or reclining. Buddha has no fixed form. Holding onto the form of silent sitting = killing the Buddha, failing to penetrate his *naturally fluid pattern of liberating relationships*.

Mazu practices ten years and leaves around 750 CE....twenty years on the road, during which China experiences arguably its most tragic decade ever with the An Lushan Rebellion→famine, natural catastrophes, and from 755-764 population tally drops from 53 million to 17 million.

When Mazu surfaces in the 770’s, his teaching has the urgency of relationships forged in the midst of crisis intervention and emergency

- “The Dao is not a function of cultivation...ordinary mind is Dao...Right now, whether walking, standing, sitting, or lying down, responding to opportunity/danger and joining things entirely is Dao.”
 - “shock tactics” as opportunities/dangers requiring immediate response
- “A Buddha is capable of authoritative personhood (*ren*). Having realized understanding kindness and the excellent nature of opportunities and dangers, one is able to break through the net of doubts snaring all sentient beings. Departing from ‘is’ and ‘is-not’ and other such bondages....leaping over quantity and calculation, one is without obstruction in whatever one does. When your situation and its pattern are penetrated, [your actions] are

like the sky giving rise to clouds; suddenly they exist and then they don't. Not leaving behind any obstructing traces, they are like phrases written on water."

For Mazu, the "the world's myriad things are one's own body" and revising the meaning of our situation should be as intentional and effortless as lifting a hand or raising our eyebrows

- Chan is realizing an utterly flexible "harmony of body and mind that reaches out through all four limbs...benefiting what can't be benefited, doing what can't be done."

Linji (d. 866): The combination of naturalism and iconoclasm in Chan reach a kind of high point with Linji who advocated becoming a "true person of no rank" (*wuwei zhenren* 無位 真人, "lively as a fish jumping in the water, simply performing one's function in response to all situations," but who also said that "if you meet 'Buddha' on the road, kill him."

Linji's enlightenment story: Huangbo's "grandmotherly kindness" and Dayu's challenging of "bed-wetting little imp"...blows as 'preventative medicine'

- Linji's house style: showing the kindness of freeing students from attachments to "Buddha" and "Dharma" which are just "hitching posts for donkeys."
 - as to the Buddha path: "you have only to be ordinary, with nothing to do—defecating, urinating, putting clothes on and off, eating, and lying down when tired...Just make yourself the master of every situation, and wherever you stand is true." (XII)
- the opening scene of recorded sayings: a public lecture attended by governor in which Linji is asked to comment on the meaning of Buddhism → invitation to "Dharma combat"
 - ideal conduct: *suishi yingyong* 遂事應用 "accord with the situation, respond as needed"
- practice = relinquishing horizons of relevance, responsibility, readiness
 - situationally expressing wisdom, moral clarity, and attentive mastery
 - demonstrating liberating relational virtuosity

Chan continues to grow and diversity into the so-called "five families" or "five houses" of Chan: **Fayan** (Fayan Wenyi 855-958); **Guiyang** (Guishan Lingyou 771-854; Yangshan Huiji 813-890); **Yunmen** (Yunmen Wenyi, d. 949); **Caodong** (Dongshan Liangjie 807-69; **Linji** (d. 866)—all heirs of Huineng and his students.

By end of beginning of the 11th century, Chan is the preeminent form of Buddhism

- Confucian literati composing a new ideal of Chinese culture to establish the celestial mandate (*tianming*) of the new Song dynasty; contra cosmopolitan Tang, and emphasis on *guwen* 古文 "old culture"; debates about the role of the cultural canon, *daoxue* vs *wenxue*
 - resonated with Chan views on the role of texts in self-cultivation, and about whether meditation → breakthrough experiences or progressive cultivation
 - Chan's Chinese origins in Huineng, its "literary" use of vernacular, and resonance with humor and spontaneity of Zhuangzi aligned well with *daoxue* camp
 - core texts: "public cases" (*gong'an* 公案) and "encounter dialogues"
- imperial support of overwhelmingly Chan "public monasteries" vs "family monasteries"
 - regular public teachings by abbots (selected on the basis of their spiritual, intellectual and aesthetic achievements); masters' quarters as private spaces for intellectual and aesthetic improvisation by elite monks and Confucian literati

The Fayuan, Guiyang and Yunmen lineages are “absorbed” by the Linji family. But by the mid-12th century: concern about the use of *gong’an* and the ritualized iconoclasm of Linji Chan → re-emergence of Caodong lineage:

- *mozhao* 默照 “silent illumination” or *zuochan* 坐禪 “just sitting” vs *huatou* 話頭 “head word”
 - Hongzhi (1091-1157): meditating to demonstrate horizonless and poised attention
 - Dahui (1089-1163): meditating to demonstrate improvisational genius using key words from *gong’an* “public cases” as canonical texts
- this 12th century complex of Chan teachings/practices brought to Japan where they become the roots of the Rinzai and Sōto Zen traditions