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The Emergence Of Ch'an Buddhism A Revisionist Perspective

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Summary

The purpose of the present paper is to examine the emergence of Ch'an Buddhism as a separate school in China. The argument is not that the traditions concerning this emergence are unreliable, but rather that attention to the historical context of their compilation may help to explain some of the distinctive features of Ch'an as a school of Chinese Buddhism.

Ch'an is defined as an esoteric school of the Mahāyāna that became a vigorous reform movement within Chinese Buddhism. Because of its esoteric nature there was no necessity to exist as a separate school. Thus the question arises what explains its emergence as such.

According to the received tradition Ch'an was brought to China by Bodhidharma and passed on through a line of successors some of whom were also patriarchs of other schools. A dramatic schism happened when, after the Fifth Patriarch, the succession split into Shen-hsiu in the North and Hui-neng in the south. While the Northern tradition collapsed, probably due to the persecution under emperor Wu-tsung, the Southern gained legitimacy.

The author points out that it is characteristic of religious movements under persecution that they preserve their histories in forms which justify both the occurrence of the persecution and the survival of the remnant. A common theme of such histories is that the survivors preserve the original, true form of the religious ideal embodied in their tradition. Thus their survival is a mandate for the radical reform of the community.

The normative Ch'an tradition shows this tendency, e.g. when their founder is said to have preached the fruitlessness of building

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temples and reciting sutras which was then revealed by the terrible persecution. The motif of the flight to the south is also understandable in this frame of reference; like Huineng, the survivors had fled southward in order to bear witness to future generations concerning the essence of the tradition, the direct experience of enlightenment out of which the dharma originated.

The author further points out that (1) there is no contradiction involved in a tradition of meditative practice co-existing with the doctrines of the various schools of Chinese Buddhism. and (2) it may be that there was an esoteric practice within early Chinese Buddhism which centered on meditation.

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The purpose of this essay is to examine the emergence of Ch'an Buddhism as a separate and distinct sect in China. The argument is NOT that the traditions concerning this emergence are unreliable, but rather that attention to the historical context of their compilation may help to explain some of the distinctive features of Ch'an as a sect of Chinese Buddhism. I will attempt to distinguish the Ch'an traditions from the emergence of Ch'an as a separate sect of Chinese Buddhism. It may be that some features of the traditional history of the Ch'an sect are a reconstruction, after the fact, for apologetic purposes.

Ch'an is an esoteric sect of Mahayana Buddhism, in which the experience of enlightenment is transmitted directly from master to disciple, through the practice of seated meditation. The name Ch'an itself suggests this singular focus on meditation-practice, since it is the Chinese pronunciation of dhyana, commonly translated by the English word "meditation." Ch'an became a vigorous reform movement within Chinese Buddhism, proposing as its distinctive feature:

A special tradition outside the scriptures;

No dependence upon words and letters;

Direct pointing at the human soul;

Seeing into one's own nature and attaining Buddhahood.[1]

Because of its esoteric nature, there would be no necessity for Ch'an to exist as a separate sect. Virtually all Buddhist sects of which I am aware, including all the major sects of Chinese

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Buddhism, have esoteric elements within them, and all sects teach and encourage the practice of seated meditation, the focus of Ch'an traditions. Furthermore, the formation of a separate and distinct sect is contrary to the esoteric impulse, since it brings into the open the intimate relationship between master and disciple, and to

some extent compromises that relationship by publicity. Because the major sects of Chinese Buddhism were formed around a master's interpretation of a specific scriptural text, the reference to "a special tradition outside the scriptures" would seem to weigh against the emergence of Ch'an as a distinct sect in its own right. Therefore, it is appropriate to ask what explains this emergence.

The received tradition is that the Ch'an sect was brought to China by a saint, Bodhidharma, who "came from the West" in the mid-sixth century to establish the sect in China. Reliable information about Bodhidharma is tenuous. Dumoulin insists: "that he existed and was a native of India can be regarded as definitely established." [2] According to tradition, he was a dhyana master who enjoyed great esteem and won many disciples. There is textual evidence to suggest that he resided for a time at the Yu ng-ning monastery on Mt. Sung, near Lo-yang, during the early sixth century, and another monastery nearby, Shao-lin, is also associated with his name.

According to the received tradition, Bodhidharma was the mediator of a tradition going back to Shakyamuni himself: the Buddha once turned a flower in his fingers while his face "broke into laughter," only the disciple Kasyapa understood the meaning of this laughter, and he was entrusted with the "seal of the Buddha-mind" on which Ch'an tradition rests.[3] Bodhidharma is the 28th patriarch in the Indian succession, and the first in the Chinese, of Ch'an patriarchs. However, as Dumoulin admits, the tradition concerning the Ch'an patriarchate is by no means clear and unambiguous, most especially so far as the Indian line is

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concerned, and the lists of Chinese Ch'an patriarchs often include names which also occur in the patriarchates of other sects of Chinese Buddhism, notably Hua-yen. Let us consider the tradition of Chinese succession in some detail.

Hui-k'o, Bodhidharma's successor, cannot be separated from the legendary accretions surrounding the career of his master, as is shown by the story that he attained his patriarchate by cutting off his arm and presenting it to Bodhidharma.[4] The facts about Seng-ts'an, the third patriarch, are so sparse that even Tao-hsuan, the official historian of the Ch'an patriarchate, does not accord him separate treatment.[5]

During the tenure of the fourth patriarch, Tao-hsin,[6] a schism occurred when one of his disciples, Fa-jung, founded a movement which (according to Masunaga, and cited by Dumoulin) was carried to Japan by Dengyo Daishi (the monk, Saicho, who founded Tendai Buddhism in Japan). As we shall see, the idea that Ch'an practice could exist within another sect (T'ien-t'ai in China, Tendai in Japan) is suggestive concerning the origins of Ch'an as a separate sect.

Then, after the fifth patriarch, Hung-jen, came the dramatic schism brought about by the controversy over who would be the sixth patriarch. Shen-hsiu, the foremost disciple of Hung-jen, appears to have been accepted by the majority as deserving the succession; however, an independent tradition grew up that the master had secretly designated Hui-neng as the sixth patriarch. This tradition became entrenched in the South, and the collapse of the northern traditions, apparently as a result of the death of Shen-hsiu's disciples during the T'ang persecutions, left the southern tradition in

possession of the field.

Thus, in the normative tradition, Hui-neng, the Sixth patriarch in the Chinese succession, is regarded as the "second" and actual founder of Ch'an, hallowed by many generations of disciples. Modern scholars who have examined the sources of biographical

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information about him, the earliest of which come from the late T'ang and Sung periods, do not find that these sources inspire confidence.^[7] At the core of the traditions concerning Hui-neng stands the dramatic episode of his nocturnal, and therefore secret, succession, and his "flight to the south" to escape the vengeance of his opponents. Even Dumoulin, who gives credence to much of the historical information about Hui-neng, sees the core of this tradition as a "tendentious invention" aimed at the enemies of the southern Ch'an schools, which are represented in this tradition as the legitimate successor to Bodhidharma. It appears that we do not possess any historically reliable sources for either the life or the teachings of Hui-neng.

The period from the death of Hui-neng (c.713) until the persecution of Buddhism under the Emperor Wu-tsung (842~45) is the Golden Age of Ch'an, about which chronicles, sayings, and kung-an (koan) collections, preserved mostly in Japan, furnish us with virtually unlimited information. Only the southern Ch'an schools survived and flourished after the great persecution, and these traditions were preserved and given their normative shape in the so-called "Five Houses" of Ch'an Buddhism. Let us now consider some of the factors which may have influenced the preservation and shaping of the Ch'an traditions in the aftermath of the great persecution of Buddhism in the later T'ang Dynasty.

It is characteristic of religious movements under persecution that they preserve their histories in forms that justify both the occurrence of persecution and the survival of a "remnant." A common theme of such histories is that of repristination, i.e; that the surviving remnant preserves the original, pure form of the religious ideal which is embodied in their tradition, and that the survival of the pure remnant is thus a mandate for the radical reform of the community. The repristination motif thus functions both as an explanation of why the persecution came upon the community (it has corrupted the purity of its tradition), and as a

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justification of the remnant's survival.

The normative Ch'an tradition shows this tendency. Ch'an preserves a "secret" tradition which goes back to Shakyamuni himself, and which contains the "essence" of his own experience of enlightenment, to be transmitted to future generations. This secret is transmitted directly from Master to disciple through non-verbal communication, based on the practice of seated meditation. The clear implication is that those sects which were destroyed had either lost or corrupted the original, pure tradition, and were thus purged in order to allow the original dharma to emerge from

the purifying fires of persecution. This view not only validates the survivors' tradition (now in possession of the field by default, as it were), but also provides a way to deal with the well-attested phenomenon of "survival guilt" associated with those who do survive such a holocaust.[8] Thus Bodhidharma, the Founder, is portrayed as wandering from place to place, eventually reaching the center of Imperial power, fearlessly preaching the fruitlessness of building temples and reciting sutras... preaching those activities whose " fruitlessness " was revealed by the terrible persecution.

The practice of seated meditation is basic to any form of monastic Buddhism whatsoever. Likewise, any monastic establishment would include persons responsible for teaching and overseeing this practice. Such people would be dhyana "masters" (i.e.; teachers of meditation practice), in both name and function. In such a monastery, the dharma master might or might not be the same person responsible for dhyana instruction. It seems plausible that a person known to be a dhyana instructor in a given monastery would not necessarily be the preserver and transmitter of a distinctive sectarian tradition (although he would, of course, be the preserver and transmitter of a tradition about the practice of seated meditation). This would explain a succession of teachers (dhyana masters, in Chinese, Ch'an masters) who need not be

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representatives of a separate, sectarian tradition. It is this phenomenon, I suggest, which underlies the traditions about a pre- T'ang Dynasty Ch'an "patriarchate, " and which also explains the confusion between the Ch'an patriarchate and those of other sects, especially Hua-yen. There is nothing unique about Ch'an doctrine; it is an eclectic form of Mahayana philosophy. So there is no contradiction involved in a tradition of meditation practice co-existing with the sectarian doctrines of the various sects of Chinese Buddhism. Masters whose names appear in the succession-lists of both Ch'an and another sectarian tradition would simply be both dharma- and dhyana-masters in their respective monasteries.

The strong apologetic motif of the "flight to the south," to avoid the wrath of those disappointed by the secret succession of Hui-neng (Shen-hsiu and his followers), is also understandable in this frame of reference. Shen-hsiu represents the "mainstream" of Chinese Buddhism, precisely those elements which would be wiped out by the persecution (as indeed the northern tradition was). In the relatively isolated monasteries of the south, those who fled would have naturally looked back on their experience as containing a message for future generations. This message was eventually understood: they preserved the pure, original insights upon which the tradition rested for its liberating spiritual power. They had survived--fleeing to the south as had the legendary Hui-neng--in order to bear witness to future generations concerning the "essence" of the tradition, embodied in the direct, immediate experience of enlightenment out of which the dharma originated. Scriptures, temples, icons might be destroyed (as they were); masters of doctrinal subtlety might be martyred or disappear into the safety of anonymity; but the liberating power of the tradition could be preserved within the framework of meditation practice, in a word, ch'an. Thus the purity of the tradition was restored, to be handed down to future generations.

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One final comment: It may be that there was an esoteric practice within early Chinese Buddhism which centered on meditation. The evidence is suggestive. The rapid success of the Buddhist mission in China points to a superiority over Taoist folk religion, and this could well lie in the superiority of meditation practice over the ancient folk-Taoist "internal hygiene" (nei-tan). Among the earliest Buddhist writings to be translated were sutras which dealt with meditation and described the stages of consciousness along the way to liberating wisdom. We know that the earliest forms of meditation practiced in China were the Amida vision and the Prajna-paramita-samadhi, which sees through the emptiness of all things. None of this is reflected in the Mahayana philosophy which characterizes the major sects prior to the emergence of the Ch'an schools. The evidence indicates that all the schools which were carried from China to Japan prior to the great persecution contained an esoteric element (including Tendai, the source of all the "popular" Buddhist movements in Japan).

If we acknowledge that the Ch'an schools preserve an esoteric form of Mahayana Buddhism, based on the practice of seated meditation, then the Ch'an traditions do not falsify the history of Buddhism in China, except in the sense that emphasis on seated meditation and the direct experience of enlightenment must be understood as a perspective on Chinese Buddhism as a whole, rather than as a basis for sectarian separatism.

At its best, Ch'an has never been sectarian in spirit. Perhaps this revisionist perspective on its early history may serve to reawaken its reforming spirit for our age.

禪宗起源新探

史維仁

提要

本文目的，在於探索禪宗何以在中國佛教以不同的宗派出現。要討論的，並非謂傳統上所述禪宗如何成立的講法為不可信，而是注意到記載這些史事的史籍如何編成，或有助於解釋禪宗的特有風貌。

禪宗被認定是大乘佛教的秘傳宗派且曾在中國佛教內有過強有力的改革；禪宗是由菩提達磨帶進中國來，他有一代一代的華夏繼承人，而這些繼承人之中有若干人卻同時是其它宗派的祖師；自五祖而後，禪宗戲刻性地分裂，北宗以神秀為首，南方則以慧能為首，後來北宗可能由於唐武宗的毀佛而消沈，而南宗取得了正統地位。

作者指出一般宗教運動的特性為：舉凡一個宗教受到逼害之後，其教史必然探究教難何以發生？又檢討教難後還遺留了些什麼？一般而言，這類宗教史籍會顯示出倖存者保存了最原始、最純真的教旨，而這既原始又純真的教旨卻反映了倖存者這一派的傳統，於是倖存者們便接管了一切，連最初的改革運動亦出於他們之手了。

標準的禪宗傳統顯示了上述的趨向，也就是說，當教史記載他們的創始者曾在說法中申言建寺誦經無用，這是他們經歷了可怖的滅法運動，覺得寺院建成終會被毀，經典寫成終會被燒的反映。又慧能向南逃亡的故事，其主題也可從上述架構中弄個明白：由於武宗毀佛，倖存者逃亡到南方避難後，覺得誦經無用，因而提出佛法中原本所無的 [頓悟] 之說，為了使後世禪師信服，乃有慧能創頓教之說。

進一步，本文作者指出以下兩點：(一)禪宗的修禪方式跟中國其它佛教宗派的教義並無牴牾之處。(二)早期的中國佛教可能有一秘傳的修行方式，而這方式是以坐禪為中心。

[1] This famous four-line stanza is attributed to Bodhidharma, but was actually formulated much later; according to Suzuki [Essays in Zen Buddhism, vol.I,(London, 1933; new eds., 1950, 1958), p.176], the verses can be traced back no further than Nan-ch'uan P'u-yuan, a Ch'an master of the T'ang era (traditional dates, 748~834).

[2] A.History of Zen Buddhism (1969), p.69.

[3] Cf. Dumoulin, Wu-men Kuan: Der Pass ohne Tor (Monumenta Nipponica Monograph No. 13; G, Tokyo, 1953), p.171ff. I have been unable to trace this Kasyapa legend to sources outside the Ch'an tradition, but I suspect that it would be characteristic of esoteric Buddhism in general to preserve such a story.

[4] Earliest information about Hui-k'o is found in T'ang Dynasty sources; cf. Ching-Chueh (ed.), Leng-ch'ieh shih-chih chi, in Ta ch'wun tsang, vol. 51, pp.1284-86; Tu Fei, Ch'uan-fa pao-chi, op, cit., p.1291.

[5] Cf.Ching -chu (ed.), Leng-ch'ieh shih chi, op. cit p.1286; other sources appear to depend on this account.

[6] Cf. Ching -chueh, as above, pp. 1286-89; Tu Fei, as above, p.1291.

[7] For example, see Ching -chueh, as above, pp. 1291ff.; Tu Fei, as above, p. 1291; also the anonymous source Li-tai fa-pao chi, op. Cit., p. 182.Sung Dynasty sources appear to depend on these accounts. It is of interest that in all the T'ang Dynasty sources Shen hsiu represents the main Line of succession. Ui, in Zenshuu Kenkyuu (Cf. Dumoulin, A History of Zen Buddhism, p.302, n.1), examines fifteen primary sources of biographical information about Hui-neng and concludes that none of them can be traced with confidence to a time prior to the great T'ang persecutions.

[8] See Robert J.Lifton, Death In Life: Survivors of Hiro-shima (New York, 1967), esp. Chapter 12, "The Survivor."