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# Chapter 12

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## The Chan School (Zen Buddhism)

### Introduction

The Chan School, developed in China between the sixth and the eighth century, is generally regarded as a genuinely Chinese Buddhist school. It was later taken to Japan where it became prominent. Because Chan was first introduced to the Western world in the twentieth century through its Japanese branch (most notably through the interpretations of a Japanese scholar Daisetz Teitaro Suzuki), it is more commonly known by its Japanese pronunciation, “Zen.” The word “chan” is the Chinese translation of the Sanskrit *dhyana*, which means meditation.<sup>1</sup> Chan’s Indian heritage was not clearly established, even though according to the legend within the Chan School, the teaching of Chan originated in India with the historical Buddha. Legend has it that the Buddha transmitted his esoteric teaching in private to a disciple, and this teaching was different from what the Buddha preached to the general assembly. This teaching did not rely on written sutras, and was orally passed on from one patriarch to another. The twenty-eighth patriarch Bodhidharma (470–543) brought the teaching to China in the sixth century, so the legend goes, and the Chan School revered him as the First Patriarch. The lineage continued with Hui-ke (487–593), Seng-can (dates unknown), Dao-xin (580–636) and to Hong-ren (601–74). Within the Chan tradition, they were regarded as the second, the third, the fourth, and the fifth patriarch respectively.<sup>2</sup> But the school split into the Northern Chan and the Southern Chan after Hong-ren. Each of the two schools claimed that their leader, Shen-xiu (ca. 605–706) for the Northern School and Hui-neng (638–713) for the Southern School, was the authentic sixth patriarch.

According to the *Platform Sutra of the Sixth Patriarch*, the fifth patriarch Hong-ren held a contest among his disciples for the verse that best expounded the teaching of Chan, so that he could choose the disciple to

become his successor. Shen-xiu was the head disciple at the time, while Hui-neng was an illiterate, low-class laborer at the temple. After Shen-xiu had written his verse, all disciples thought that he would surely inherit the sacred robe as well as the title. But Hui-neng came up with another verse, which was judged by Hong-ren to be superior. For fear that other disciples might impose harm on Hui-neng out of jealousy or contempt for his low class, Hong-ren passed on the sacred robe secretly to Hui-neng in the middle of the night and sent him away. Hui-neng went back to the southern part of China, where he originally came from. After Hong-ren's death, followers of Shen-xiu put him forward as the sixth patriarch. Years later Hui-neng also amassed a sufficient following and a separate Chan School was formed in the South. The rivalry between the Northern School and the Southern School lasted for about 100 years, and initially the Northern School had the upper hand. Eventually, however, largely through the efforts of Hui-neng's major disciple Shen-hui (670–762), the Southern School was recognized by the Chinese royal court to be the genuine Chan. Hui-neng thus became the generally acclaimed "sixth patriarch" of the Chan School.

There is now a consensus among commentators that this story, as told in the *Platform Sutra*, was probably fabricated by Hui-neng's followers, in particular by Shen-hui. We thus cannot be sure whether the fifth patriarch Hong-ren really passed on the robe to Hui-neng. Some scholars argue that it was actually Shen-xiu, not Hui-neng, who inherited the true spirit of Chan's tradition descended from the first patriarch.<sup>3</sup> Nevertheless, it was Hui-neng's teachings, especially the ones revealed in the *Platform Sutra* (sometimes translated as the *Altar Sutra*) that got passed on to later generations and became the core teaching of the Chan School.<sup>4</sup> In D. T. Suzuki's praise: "The development of [Chan] thought in China until the day of Hui-neng followed more or less the Indian pattern, but after him its course began to run characteristically along the Chinese channel."<sup>5</sup> To understand Chan's thought as a form of Chinese Buddhism, we should study Hui-neng's rather than Shen-xiu's teaching. Therefore, our analysis of the Chan School will focus on the Southern School originated in Hui-neng. Whenever we use "the Chan School" or "Chan" without qualification, we refer specifically to the Southern Chan School. We will treat the *Platform Sutra of the Sixth Patriarch* as the theoretical foundation of the Chan School.

The *Platform Sutra of the Sixth Patriarch* is a work of great philosophical significance. As Philip Yampolsky says: "This work marks a shift in emphasis in Chinese Buddhism, a move from an abstract Nirvana to an individual enlightenment, available to anyone who seeks to realize through meditation the Buddha nature inherent within him."<sup>6</sup>

There are different versions of the *Platform Sutra*, but two of them stand out. One is the more elaborated version compiled in the thirteenth century. It thenceforth became the standard text for the Chan School. Another was a much older, shorter, but error-packed version, which was unearthed in the caves of Dun-huang at the turn of the twentieth century.<sup>7</sup> The primary sources for this chapter include these two versions of the *Platform Sutra*, as well as Hui-neng's commentary on the *Diamond Sutra*. We will also consult works by two leading Southern Chan masters: Huang Bo [Huang Po] (?–ca. 850) and Lin Ji (Lin-Chi) (ca. 810–66), since both were instrumental in the further development and transformation of the Chan School.

In a nutshell, the essence of Chan's philosophy could be described as a philosophy of pure mind.<sup>8</sup> The Chan School preaches the retrieval of one's original mind. Hong-ren describes the heritage of Chan as the teachers' intimately imparting the original mind from one to another.<sup>9</sup> The passage of mind-transmission does not rely on verbal communication. Therefore, Chan masters play down the importance of language. Their view on mind and their view on language are closely related. In this chapter, we shall explicate the Chan School's philosophy of mind and philosophy of language. But before we begin, a careful comparison between the Northern Chan and the Southern Chan is in order. We should note that it was through the transformation that the Southern School made to the original heritage that the characteristics of the Chinese Chan School were established. This school does not posit any transcendental realm over our mundane world; it does not represent the Buddha as a supreme being. It is a philosophy about ordinary people and ordinary things. But it is in their ordinariness that the Chan School places the highest value.

## Theoretical Divergences between the Northern School and the Southern School

Even if the story about the competition between Shen-xiu's verse and Hui-neng's verse is unfounded, it is a historical fact that there were two schools with different teachings and practices. The Northern School taught gradual enlightenment; the Southern School taught immediate enlightenment. The Northern School emphasized the method of "sitting in meditation," in the process of which one contemplates one's mind; the Southern School disputed the practice of sitting in meditation and proclaimed that enlightenment could be reached in the midst of any

daily activity, such as drinking tea or chopping wood.<sup>10</sup> Furthermore, according to several Chan scholars, the theoretical foundation of the Northern School is the *Lankavatara Sutra*, while the Southern School expounds primarily the *Diamond Sutra*.<sup>11</sup> In this section, we will begin by analyzing the two verses by Shen-xiu and Hui-neng, to see how the two schools differ philosophically.

### *Two verses*

Shen-xiu's verse says:

The body is the tree of enlightenment [the Bodhi tree]<sup>12</sup>  
The mind is like a clear mirror-stand.  
Polish it diligently time and again,  
Not letting it gather dust.<sup>13</sup>

Hui-neng's verse says,<sup>14</sup>

Enlightenment [Bodhi] originally has no tree,  
And a clear mirror is not a stand.  
Originally there's not a single thing –  
Where can dust be attracted?<sup>15</sup>

In the verse of Shen-xiu, the assumption is that we have an originally pure mind, but it is being constantly defiled by greed, anger, and confusion (the so-called “Three Poisons” of the mind). Therefore, we need to keep a vigilant watch over our mind, to get rid of all defilements. The mind mentioned in this verse seems to be an inactive entity, which can “gather dust” from time to time. As Whalen Lai notes: “The mind as mirror is passive, a receptacle of external data. It is vulnerable to the distortion by defilements (dust).”<sup>16</sup> The real agent seems to be our “self” – the one doing the monitoring, cleansing, and polishing. There is thus a duality between the inborn pure mind and the watchful mind. Furthermore, the initial purity of our mind cannot be preserved without the assiduous effort of the watchful mind. It is therefore a tireless process to attain enlightenment. Nirvana is the end result of one's vigilance: if one manages to wipe away all dust, *eventually* one will get there. But the verse does not mention that an obtainable goal is in sight. This verse supports the Southern School's accusation that the Northern School teaches *gradual* enlightenment.

In Hui-neng's verse, on the other hand, there is no duality between the inborn mind and the active mind or between purity and defilement.

There was not even a “One” to begin with – there was originally *nothing*. The motto “Originally there’s not a single thing” became a fundamental precept of the Chan School.<sup>17</sup> Hui-neng’s verse points out Shen-xiu’s mistake in treating Mind as a substance or an entity that needs to be preserved and cleaned all the time. Hui-neng’s teaching is that there was no Mind, no thing. Since there was no entity, no substance, there can be no defilement. The mind is originally clean and pure and it remains clean and pure at all times.<sup>18</sup> There is no need to be troubled by worldly trivialities, since nothing could possibly obstruct the mind. Once one can see this point, one *immediately* gains enlightenment. “Enlightenment is only the mind (lamp) allowed to shine forth by itself (light). The mind is none other than its own enlightenment.”<sup>19</sup> This realization is the foundation for the Southern Chan’s method of immediate enlightenment. Instead of using the metaphor of a mirror-stand gathering dust, Hui-neng often uses the metaphor of the sun’s being covered by clouds. If our mind is like the mirror-stand which has gathered dust, then it is no longer clean and pure. If, on the other hand, it is like the sun temporarily covered by clouds, then even if we don’t see it, it is still brilliant and clear. Clouds do not change the brilliant nature of the sun; false views and erroneous habits do not alter the purity of the mind either.

Another subtle criticism Hui-neng’s verse makes of Shen-xiu is that in the latter’s depiction there is an element of conscious effort to attain something in the latter’s depiction.<sup>20</sup> Shen-xiu’s verse speaks of constantly wiping away dust to preserve the mind’s purity, but in Hui-neng’s view, this is to *fixate* on purity. He says: “If you arouse the mind to fixate on purity, you create the delusion of purity.”<sup>21</sup> Hui-neng says of the Buddha: “it is because the notion of attaining something does not occur that he realizes enlightenment.”<sup>22</sup> If one consciously engages in the task of cleansing, polishing, and achieving, then one has already violated the first teaching of the Buddha: do not grasp, do not fixate. Therefore, Hui-neng’s verse is meant to point out how Shen-xiu does not understand the true spirit of Buddhism.

The underlying theoretical differences between these two verses could be traced back to the two main texts: the *Lankavatara Sutra* adhered to by the Northern School and the *Diamond Sutra* taught by the Southern School. What are the differences in the two texts’ teachings? According to Wing-tsit Chan’s summary, the emphasis of the *Lankavatara Sutra* is Ultimate Reality, while the focus of the *Diamond Sutra* is the Mind.<sup>23</sup> However, for the *Lankavatara Sutra*, the Mind is Ultimate Reality. A more fitting description is to say that the *Lankavatara Sutra* has a metaphysical interest in Mind as Ultimate Reality, while the *Diamond*



*Sutra* has primarily an ethical concern with individual minds as the foundation for self-realization.

### *Mind-Only*

The *Lankavatara Sutra* expounds the theme of “Mind-Only.”<sup>24</sup> The *Mind* (with a capital letter) is not the same as *minds* of sentient beings. This Mind is called “the Pure Mind” or “the One Mind.” An ordinary person’s mind is called “a defiled mind,” which is many steps away from the One Pure Mind. In Robert Zeuschner’s explanation, “the so-called defiled mind is the activity of mind which conceptualizes, judges, distinguishes subject from object, hates, craves, and constructs the conceptual framework within which we categorize our perceptions and experiences.”<sup>25</sup> If this interpretation is correct, then the defiled mind is simply humans’ (as well as other sentient beings’) cognitive activities, through which the world-as-we-know-it comes into existence. Only the Pure Mind has the status of being reality-as-such, being the *True Thusness*. There are thus two senses of “mind”: the one metaphysical, pure, and ultimate; the other experiential, defiled, and phenomenal. The *Lankavatara Sutra*’s teaching of the two senses of “mind” is in agreement with the general theme in Mahayana Buddhism. The *Treatise on the Awakening of Faith in the Mahayana*, for example, presents the two aspects of “mind” as follows: “One is the aspect of Mind in terms of the Absolute (Suchness), and the other is the aspect of Mind in terms of phenomena (birth and death). Each of these two aspects embraces all states of existence.”<sup>26</sup> Relying on these teachings, Shen-xiu also talks about the two functions of mind this way: “The first is the pure mind. The second is the defiled mind. . . . From the very beginning, both exist.”<sup>27</sup> The theory of “Two Minds” in the Northern Chan School is thus established.

The *Lankavatara Sutra*’s “Mind-Only” thesis is also a reassertion of the anti-realist tenet of Buddhism in general. In the *Sutra*, it is constantly repeated that only Mind is real; the external world does not exist outside of Mind. In its worldview, there is no dualism between Mind and the world. What the *Lankavatara Sutra* means by non-duality is that all things are reflections of Mind, and thus “all things have no reality.” It says: “When it is recognized that the visible world is no more than Mind itself, external objects cease to be realities, and there is nothing but what is discriminated by the mind and perceived [as external].”<sup>28</sup> As we have seen in the Consciousness-Only School and the Hua-yen School, a correlated thesis of Mind-Only is that of anti-

realism. In the *Lankavatara Sutra*, the Buddha denies that he has fallen “into a realistic view by upholding the noble doctrine of self-existing reality.”<sup>29</sup> Reality does not exist without Mind, and what we take to be external objects are in reality *not* external to us.

According to the *Lankavatara Sutra*, furthermore, to say that all things are reflections of Mind does not give credence to the existence of things, because these “reflections” were brought about by the discrimination of deluded individual minds. The *Lankavatara Sutra* says: “People grasping their own shadows of discrimination uphold the discrimination of dharma and [no-dharma] and, failing to carry out the abandonment of the dualism, they go on discriminating and never attain tranquility.”<sup>30</sup> The causal process between discrimination and external things, as depicted in the *Lankavatara Sutra*, is very similar to the one given by the Consciousness-Only School. At the basis is the Alaya consciousness, from which “the whole psychic system evolves mutually conditioning.”<sup>31</sup>

Various forms of consciousness discriminate shapes and sounds, etc., thereby producing various characteristics and objects. The cessation of all consciousnesses, on the other hand, is the attainment of “noble wisdom” or the enlightenment itself. It is only “when the [consciousness] which is caused by discrimination ceases,” that one can “enter into Nirvana.”<sup>32</sup> “By Nirvana . . . is meant the looking into the abode of reality as it really is in itself.”<sup>33</sup> This realization can only be obtained through the transformation of one’s consciousness into *wisdom*.

In contrast to the *Lankavatara Sutra*’s teaching of Oneness, the *Diamond Sutra*’s teaching seems to be about “nothingness.” However, it also rejects all conceptual distinctions such as “One” and “many” or “being” and “non-being.” The *Diamond Sutra*’s basic doctrine is that one should not adhere to anything, including the very notion of “nothingness.” The *Sutra* says: “The Tathagata<sup>34</sup> teaches that all ideas are no-ideas, and again that all beings are no-beings.”<sup>35</sup> In the text, the Buddha advises people to rid themselves of ideas of *dharma* and *no-dharma*. He says, “Why? Because if . . . they cherish the idea of a dharma, they are attached to an ego, a person, a being, or a soul. . . . If they cherish the idea of a no-dharma, they are attached to an ego, a person, a being, or a soul. Therefore, do not cherish the idea of a dharma, nor that of a no-dharma.”<sup>36</sup> From these quotes we can see where Hui-neng’s assertion “there was originally nothing” comes from.

In summary, both the Northern and the Southern Schools can be grouped under the general “Mind-Only” school, but they have different interpretations of “Mind-Only.” The Northern Chan’s Mind-Only thesis is close to the “Consciousness-Only” thesis of the Consciousness-

Only School and the “Mind-Only” thesis of the Hua-yan School: The world is unreal; external objects are productions of transforming consciousnesses or deluded minds. Thus, the world can be ontologically reduced to the Mind. The Southern Chan places less emphasis on the unreality of our world. Hui-neng’s interpretation of “Mind-Only” is that “all truths are in our own minds.”<sup>37</sup> In other words, it is not that the whole world exists only in our minds, but that if we see our minds’ pure essence, then we see all the truths about the world. By the same token, once we see that the mind and the world are identical, we will see that the understanding of truths about the world leads to knowledge of the mind. The world thus becomes an epistemic route to our knowledge of the ultimate truth of the mind. The mind–world identity becomes an epistemic claim, rather than a claim of the ontological reduction of the world to the mind.

### *Beholding the mind vs. seeing one’s nature*

Following the *Lankavatara Sutra*, Shen-xiu’s teaching focuses on “beholding the mind”; “beholding purity.”<sup>38</sup> To “behold” means to watch; in this case, it is to watch with the mind’s eye during solitary meditation. Mind and purity are one and the same: it is also called the “Pure Mind.” Shen-xiu says: “Of the myriad dharmas, mind is the most basic. All the various dharmas are simply the products of the mind. If one can comprehend the mind, then the myriad practices will all be accomplished.”<sup>39</sup> By keeping the original Mind and original purity in view, one can spot all sorts of defilements. One thus needs to be particularly diligent in extirpating attachments and obscurations that defile the mind. According to Robert Zeuschner, this purifying process begins with controlling “the activities of the senses,” since defilements are rooted in sense perceptions.<sup>40</sup> For example, our taste buds get more sophisticated as we mature and our desire increases with our more discriminatory senses. As a result, we lose the infant’s simple enjoyment of food. Our mind makes further discrimination which sometimes eludes the senses. For instance, our eyes may not be able to detect any difference between natural and artificial diamonds. But because we call the former “real” diamond and the latter “fake”, we crave one but not the other. These discriminations are the root of our cravings and discontents. When the defiled mind is cleansed of all obscurations that come from conception and perception, one *beholds* purity.

Hui-neng takes the *Diamond Sutra* to be about “seeing one’s essential nature.” In his *Commentary on the Diamond Sutra*, he says: “It was



just because people of the world do not see their essential nature that the teaching of seeing essential nature was established.”<sup>41</sup> There are at least two differences between Hui-neng’s “seeing essential nature” and Shen-xiu’s “beholding the mind.” First, “to see” (*jian*) depicts a more alert mental state than “to behold” (*guan*) does: the former implies comprehension and awareness; the latter could refer to an act of passive watching or looking.<sup>42</sup> Second, “nature” has the connotation of “essence” that the term “mind” does not. As Suzuki puts it: “[Nature] means something without which no existence is possible, or thinkable as such.”<sup>43</sup> In other words, we could never lose our nature, but we could someday lose our mind. Hui-neng does not give up the use of the term “mind”; rather, he interprets “mind” in the way “nature” is normally understood. For example, he explains the view of mind in the *Diamond Sutra* this way: “Clear, free, empty, and silent, perception and action equally enlightened, mirrorlike awareness unobstructed – this is truly the liberated Buddha-nature.”<sup>44</sup> This shows that the clear, free mind is simply the inherent Buddha-nature itself. Since it is our individual minds that sustain Buddha-nature, Hui-neng’s interest is in the minds of sentient beings, not in some abstract *Mind*. Neither in the *Diamond Sutra*, nor in Hui-neng’s *Platform Sutra*, was there strong emphasis on the defiled mind. Our minds are not just *originally* clean and pure; they are *intrinsically* clean and pure. That is to say, our pure minds are never lost within us; their essential nature *is* forever clean and pure. By shifting attention from “mind” to “nature,” or by identifying “pure mind” with “essential nature,” Hui-neng establishes a new school of Chan. The Southern Chan thus separates itself from the Northern Chan in its rejection of the “two minds” theory. Instead, it focuses on the essential Buddha-nature and the intrinsic pure mind, with which everyone is endowed at the root of his existence. Furthermore, our essential nature is Buddha-nature, which enables us to become Buddhas ourselves. Hui-neng clearly states: “All beings are originally themselves Buddhas.”<sup>45</sup> If so, then there is no unbridgeable gap between the Buddha and us: all we need to do is to see *this*. If we can see that we ourselves are Buddhas, then we would understand that there is no need to seek teachings from sutras or masters. We should be our own teachers.

## Meditation

The *Lankavatara Sutra* advocates meditation (the original meaning of the word *chan*) as the method for ceasing discrimination and entering nirvana. According to the Buddha’s teaching in the *Lankavatara Sutra*,

there are four kinds of meditation: (1) meditation as practiced by the ignorant; (2) meditation as devoted to the examination of meaning; (3) meditation with True Thusness (*Tathata*<sup>46</sup>); and (4) meditation with all beings as its objects. The first kind of meditation is done by beginners, who, after recognizing the unreality of worldly things, aim for the cessation of thought. They examine each of their thoughts, casting them away until they reach the mental state where there is no thought. The second kind of meditation is performed by those who have gone beyond the first level and proceeded to the investigation of the true meaning of Reality. These people have a deeper understanding of the egolessness of things. The third kind of meditation enables one to eliminate all discrimination. It is accomplished by people who have entered nirvana. The final kind of meditation is the pure form performed by the Tathagata. In this meditative mode, one contemplates all sentient beings and devotes oneself to the relief of their suffering.<sup>47</sup>

The Northern School's teaching of gradual enlightenment could be seen as a natural outcome of its teaching of the purity of the Mind and its practice of meditation. Since ordinary people's minds are all defiled, they need to sit in meditation when they examine their thoughts one by one and cast away the erroneous ones. The more that dust is wiped away, the cleaner the mirror becomes; the more that erroneous thoughts are eradicated, the purer the mind gets to be. This process requires accumulated efforts, and thus it is "gradual."<sup>48</sup> When one engages in meditation, one needs to shun the outside world and confine oneself in a quiet solitude. In the *Lankavatara Sutra*, the Buddha says to his disciple, "This discrimination must be discarded by you, and having discarded this, you should declare the truth of solitude."<sup>49</sup> The method of solitary "sitting meditation" seems to be the original teaching of the Chan School as expounded in the *Lankavatara Sutra*.<sup>50</sup> Only through this method can one reach the state of tranquility. "By tranquility is meant oneness, and oneness gives birth to the highest [concentration], which is gained by entering into the womb of Tathagatahood, which is the realm of noble wisdom realized in one's inmost self."<sup>51</sup> In other words, the *Lankavatara Sutra* advocates "a quietistic contemplation of one's self-nature or self-being."<sup>52</sup> This becomes the basis for the practice of the Northern Chan.

Hui-neng often criticizes the method of "sitting meditation" that characterizes the Northern Chan. He says: "Stopping the mind and contemplating quietude is pathological; it is not *chan*. Sitting all the time constricts the body – how does it help toward truth?"<sup>53</sup> He explicitly criticizes followers of Shen-xiu this way: "There are also deluded people who sit quietly with empty minds, not thinking of anything whatsoever,

and claim this is greatness. This sort of person is not worth talking to, because theirs is a wrong view.”<sup>54</sup> To Hui-neng, *chan* or meditation is not about sitting in quietude and emptying one’s mind. It is rather the practice of not letting the mind get “aroused over any good or bad objects in the external world”; it is seeing “the immutability of your own essential nature inwardly.”<sup>55</sup> Such a practice does not require solitude or isolation from worldly affairs. It can be accomplished at any time in doing anything. At any moment of one’s daily life, once one sees the importance of a pure mind and drops all trivial concerns, one gains sudden enlightenment. Whenever one can understand that one’s true nature is essentially clean and pure, one stops fighting against oneself and enters nirvana instantaneously. In Suzuki’s explanation, the *chan* or meditation that Hui-neng preaches “is not quietism, nor is it tranquilization; it is rather acting, moving, performing deeds, seeing, hearing, thinking, remembering.” In fact, this kind of meditation “is attained where there is, so to speak, no [meditation] practiced.”<sup>56</sup>

### *Enlightenment and self-realization*

Both the Northern School and the Southern School preach “self-realization.” They call nirvana “the realm of self-realization.” Self-realization is possible because one is endowed with the pure self-nature. If one can rediscover this innate pure nature, then one can realize oneself. We have seen that the Northern Chan emphasizes self-purification, which is an accumulated effort. Hence, enlightenment has to be a gradual process.<sup>57</sup> For the Southern Chan, self-realization requires one to employ inborn wisdom. Hui-neng says: “When you are not obstructed by the characters of things, that is called realization.”<sup>58</sup> Using the metaphor of mining gold in the mountain, Hui-neng says:

The body is like the world, personal self is like the mountain, afflictions are like the ore, Buddha-nature is like the gold, wisdom is like the master craftsman, intensity of diligence is like digging. In the world of the body is the mountain of personal self; in the mountain of personal self is the ore of affliction; in the ore of affliction is the jewel of Buddha-nature. Within the jewel of Buddha-nature is the master craftsman of wisdom.<sup>59</sup>

This quote reveals a process of going inward into one’s mind, to uncover one’s innately pure nature. In another context, Hui-neng also says: “Those who aspire to enlightenment should see all beings as having Buddha-nature, should see all beings as inherently endowed with

uncontaminated all-knowledge.”<sup>60</sup> Sometimes our inborn wisdom is also described as our “teacher.” Hui-neng says: “There is a teacher within one’s own mind that understands spontaneously.”<sup>61</sup> Because all we need to do is to see our own mind, our own nature, to find our own teacher and to realize our own Buddhahood, the enlightenment process is immediate, sudden, and spontaneous.

Huang Bo makes it even more clear that enlightenment (or awakening) is not something to be acquired; it is innate to us. He says, “Bodhi [Awakening, Enlightenment] is not a state. The Buddha did not attain to it. Sentient beings do not lack it. It cannot be reached with the body nor sought with the mind. All sentient beings ARE ALREADY of one form with Bodhi.”<sup>62</sup> According to Huang Bo, since Buddhahood is our essential nature, it is within us at all times. He says: “Your true nature is something never lost to you even in moments of delusion, not is it gained at the moment of Enlightenment.”<sup>63</sup> If that is the case, then there is no “effort” required. Huang Bo’s student Lin Ji also says:

Followers of the Way, the Dharma [True Teaching] of the Buddhas calls for no special undertakings. Just act ordinary, without trying to do anything particular. Move your bowels, piss, get dressed, eat your rice, and if you get tired, then lie down. Fools may laugh at me, but wise men will know what I mean.<sup>64</sup>

This remark is close in spirit to Zhuangzi’s famous motto: “*Dao* lies in excrement and urine.” The Southern Chan distinguishes itself from the Northern Chan in its emphasis on being at ease, taking it naturally. In this respect, it is more similar to the attitude of early Daoists; in particular, to that of Zhuangzi. In contrast, we could perhaps say that the Northern Chan’s watchful diligent examination of one’s mind is closer to the spirit of Confucianism.

The Southern Chan’s teaching of “immediate” or “sudden” enlightenment is not just aimed at refuting the Northern Chan’s teaching of “gradual enlightenment”; it is also directed against the traditional Indian Buddhist teaching of self-cultivation through many lives. As Lin Ji says, “You followers of the Way fail to realize that this journey to enlightenment that takes three [immeasurably long periods of time] to accomplish is meaningless.”<sup>65</sup> Enlightenment does not take any measurement of time; what counts is only the present moment. “Everything I say to you is for the moment only, medicine to cure the disease.”<sup>66</sup> According to Hui-neng, what it takes is only a moment of thought. He says: “When your own nature produces a single thought of good, it can



achieve the ending of countless evils, all the way to unsurpassed enlightenment.”<sup>67</sup> One good thought can wipe out all past evil deeds; one bad deed can also stamp out all past good deeds. From thought to thought, one can either get into nirvana or quit nirvana. Therefore, the nirvana as the Southern Chan teaches it is not some realm other than this world. It is a mental state in which one is free from obsession and attachment. One is still in this world, yet one’s thought transcends the world. This is nirvana. At the same time, reaching nirvana does not guarantee eternal bliss. The next moment, one could be plagued by negative thoughts and emotions again and be brought back to the mundane world. Human drama inevitably sets in and one is constantly afflicted with disappointment, jealousy, despair, resentment, disquietude, and anguish. From nirvana to living hell, it all depends on one’s single thought. This is the essential teaching of Southern Chan’s sudden enlightenment.

*Summary of theoretical differences between the two schools*

In conclusion, we can say that the Northern Chan holds a thesis about the world that is very similar to those of the Consciousness-Only School and the Hua-yan School: the world is not real. Along with the Hua-yan School, the Northern Chan upholds the view that only Mind is real. Furthermore, the Northern Chan teaches solitary meditation as the means for entering nirvana. The Southern Chan, in comparison, holds a view closer to that of the Tian-tai School.<sup>68</sup> The world we live in is the only world there is. To seek nirvana, one does not need to shun the world, cease thought, and regard all things as illusions. Secondly, the Northern Chan’s theory of mind is based on the “Pure Mind/defiled mind” division that is prevalent in Mahayana Buddhism. Its method of purification is closer to the Confucian spirit of daily self-examination. By contrast, the Southern Chan’s notion of mind is closer to the Daoist conception. As Whalen Lai puts it: “The Southern [Chan] school seems to follow more faithfully the notion of mind discovered by [Zhuangzi]: an innately pure, vacuous, radiant mind without any defilements, shining forth like the light from a candle.”<sup>69</sup> The method advocated by the Southern Chan is also in the spirit of Daoism: appreciate *Dao* in the trivialities of daily affairs. Do not strive to “attain” since *Dao* is simply in everything we do.

In the following sections, we shall use the Southern Chan as our representative of the Chan School, to further analyze Chan’s views on reality, on mind and nature, on self-knowledge and language.

## Metaphysics: Chan's View on Reality

The Chan School does not posit an ontologically independent realm separate from this world. Hui-neng states clearly: "Buddhism is in the world. It is not realized apart from the world. Seeking enlightenment apart from the world, is like looking for horns on a hare."<sup>70</sup> When asked about the *Nirvana Sutra's* teaching of "quiescent extinction," Hui-neng accused the student of resorting to "heretical, perverted views of nihilism and externalism."<sup>71</sup> In his explication, nirvana is not "the cessation of the cycle of life and death" taken literally. "Extinction of life and death" means "the extinction of grasping and rejecting." In a nutshell, Hui-neng's view of reality is that there is only one reality – our world.

Hui-neng tries to explain away the separation of the two realms – one ultimate; the other worldly – in many Buddhist texts. For instance, he says that when the *Diamond Sutra* discusses an enlightened person leaving behind the mundane world of life and death and "never returning," it does not mean that he or she is thus entering a different world. It is simply that such people have abandoned their desires. "They certainly do not take on life in the realm of desire, so they are referred to as not coming back; yet in reality there is no coming, so they are also called non-returners."<sup>72</sup> He also denies that terminology such as "the other shore," "the Pure Land," or "True Thusness" designates a separate ontological realm. Hui-neng says: "When the mind is confused, it is 'this shore.' When the mind is enlightened, it is 'the other shore.' When the mind is distorted, it is 'this shore.' When the mind is sound, it is 'the other shore'."<sup>73</sup> Hui-neng describes the "pure land," the land inhabited by the Buddha, as simply "the emergence of the pure mind."<sup>74</sup> The pure land was traditionally taken to be a transcendent realm, where those who are free from the cycle of life and death could enter and reside forever. But under Hui-neng's interpretation, it is nothing but the mental state of purity. The "True Thusness," the Ultimate Reality that Buddhists seek to enter, to Hui-neng, is simply a state of mind. He explains, "Reality does not change, suchness does not differ, when the mind does not change or differ in any situation, that is called reality as such."<sup>75</sup> Therefore, our goal is not to exit this world of life and death, but to let our minds be liberated from obsessions about life and death.

Even where the *Diamond Sutra* appears to be denying the realness of our world, Hui-neng turns the statement into a discourse on the various states of our mind. The *Diamond Sutra* says: "All created things<sup>76</sup> are like dreams, illusions, bubbles, shadows; like dew, and like lightning.

They should be viewed this way.” Hui-neng’s commentary explains: “The dreams are bodies astray, the illusions are wandering thoughts, the bubbles are afflictions, the shadows are the barriers created by past actions. These are called created things. As for uncreated truth, it is reality, apart from labels and appearances.”<sup>77</sup> In other words, it is not that external objects are mere illusions or dreams of the mind; it is rather that our mental conceptions and afflictions are illusions or dreams of the mind. Instead of taking the denial of the existence of worldly things literally, Hui-neng interprets the denial as a metaphorical explanation of the nature of our mental activities.

In this respect, the Chan School’s notion of nirvana is very similar to that of the Tian-tai School. To enter nirvana does not mean that we must die and never re-enter the cycle of life and death. The separation between nirvana and the cycle of life and death becomes merely metaphorical: when one can see the true nature of things and stop obsessing about them, one is already in the realm of nirvana. Therefore, in one instant of thought, one can immediately enter nirvana and thereby quit the mundane world.

However, to say that there is no other realm that is the *true* Reality, is not to say that therefore this reality that we are familiar with is real or that we should take things as they appear to be. To Hui-neng, our world is filled with falsehoods that we humans have created, even if it is the *only* world in which we live and die. He says, “When you understand reality is falsehood, you understand that falsehood is reality – reality and falsehood both disappear, and there is nothing else.”<sup>78</sup> Discriminations and evaluations, artificially introduced by humans, necessarily distort the true nature of things. If we recognize this fact, then we should refrain from making judgments with various terms of opposites: “beautiful” and “ugly”; “good” and “bad”; “rich” and “poor”; “knowledgeability” and “ignorance”; “just” and “unjust.” The Chan School rejects social conventions and societal discriminations. To call Chan’s view “realism” can only be done as a meta-philosophy; i.e., a second-level description of its view. It itself would not have characterized its own philosophy as “realism.” The very antinomy between the School of Being and the School of Emptiness, according to the Chan School, is founded on an invalid dichotomy between “existence” and “non-existence.” Hui-neng says, “You may want to say it is real, yet no defining characteristics can be found; you may want to say it is unreal, yet it functions without interruption. Therefore it cannot be said not to exist, yet cannot be said to exist.”<sup>79</sup> Only when we completely forget the distinction between being and non-being, real and unreal, can we have true understanding of Chan’s view on reality.

## Chan's View on Mind and Nature<sup>80</sup>

A famous Chan motto is: "This mind is the Buddha."<sup>81</sup> What could this possibly mean? In the Buddhist tradition, the term "Buddha" could designate the Ultimate Reality itself; it could also designate the historical Buddha. But in this quote, it is used in neither of these two senses. The term "Buddha" in this context should be taken to be a general term designating the property of being ultimately pure, profoundly wise, immensely compassionate; it is a synonym for "Buddhahood." Since "the Buddha" in this context refers not to a specific person, but to a specific property, the question posed by students of Chan to their masters was often: "What is the Buddha?" and not "Who is the Buddha?" This Buddhahood is the "Buddha-enabling" property; it is what makes one's becoming a Buddha possible. The Chan School teaches that everyone is born with inherent Buddhahood. As a Chan master Huang Bo explains, "The One Mind alone is the Buddha, and there is no distinction between the Buddha and sentient things."<sup>82</sup> Since possessing the property of *Buddha* makes one a Buddha oneself, a second meaning of the term "Buddha" is "one with inborn Buddhahood."

In contrast to Mencius' advocating the innate goodness of human nature, the Chan School does not posit "goodness" in human nature. According to Hui-neng, the essential Buddha-nature is neither good nor bad, since the distinction between good and bad is already a human discrimination. Hence, calling human nature "good" would fall onto the level of duality and relativity. Furthermore, Buddha-nature for the Chan School is not merely a potential, as "human nature" is for Mencius. It is rather an actuality. Everyone is already born a Buddha, but through time and mental development in the experiential world, this original state is not manifest in ordinary people. Therefore, as one gets closer to one's intrinsic nature, one gets closer to being a Buddha oneself. Enlightenment comes through an internal retrieval of the original state of one's mind and one's nature. This is the essence of Chan's teaching.

As we have explained, the Southern Chan is not as interested in the metaphysical *Mind* as it is in individual *minds*. It seldom deals with the Pure Mind as Reality-as-such. There are, however, two different conceptions of the individual mind. One is the inborn "original mind"; the other is the post-development, experiential mind that is sometimes called "the conditioned mind." Even though there are these two conceptions of individual mind, the Southern Chan rejects the two-minds theory of the Northern Chan. It insists that the original mind is not different from the conditioned mind, since we only have one mind, not two. But it also



presents the two minds as “not one.” How do we understand this “not one; not two” relation between the original mind and the conditioned mind?

What characterizes the conditioned mind is “discrimination.” Suzuki explains that “By ‘discrimination’ . . . is meant analytical knowledge, the relative and discursive understanding which we use in our everyday thinking.”<sup>83</sup> The conditioned mind begins with one’s various contacts with the *outside* world after one is born. One’s eyes perceive different shapes and colors; one’s ears perceive different sounds and tones. All these sensory data are categorized through the discriminatory capabilities of sense organs. Names are introduced; concepts are formed. Social conventions begin to take shape and value systems get instigated in the societal conceptual scheme. We are thus biologically and socially *conditioned*. Being conditioned to see differences in qualities and in values, we are deprived of our original, nondiscriminatory mind. The original mind and the conditioned mind are “not one; not two,” because there is only one mind, but it is a mind being developed at different stages. Once our mind starts to be discriminatory, it is no longer the original mind.

However, to retrieve the original pure mind, we do not need to go back to the pre-cognitive infant mind. A pure mind can be built on the post-developmental conditioned mind if we find the right way – the right view. This right view is called the “noble wisdom,” which simply consists of seeing that everyone and everything has essentially the same Buddha-nature. Differences are appearances only; in essence everything is the same. From seeing equality in all, we thus re-establish a nondiscriminatory mind. This nondiscriminatory mind is not the same as an infant’s naive inability to discriminate. It is rather a sophisticated, fully evolved Buddha mind. Because the Chan School does not shun the experiential world, it does not advocate the elimination of all perceptions, which are indispensable in our daily interactions with the world. What it preaches as “nondiscrimination” is rather a mental attitude at a different level – not at the epistemic level but at an ethical level. Hui-neng says: “If you see everyone’s bad and good but do not grasp or reject any of it, and do not become affected by it, your mind is like space.”<sup>84</sup> “Fixation on objects the moment before was affliction; detachment from objects the moment after is enlightenment.”<sup>85</sup> These sayings show that enlightenment comes when one understands that despite apparent differences in objects, all things should be assigned equal value and be given equal treatment.

The Chan School emphatically upholds the universality of Buddhahood. Buddha-nature is inherent in everyone. There are no degrees or

variations of Buddha-nature. Hui-neng says: “You should know that the Buddha-nature is fundamentally no different in ignorant people and in wise people. It is just because of difference in confusion and enlightenment that there is ignorance and wisdom.”<sup>86</sup> Hui-neng does not deny that people have different “faculties,” and that those with small faculties have a harder time getting enlightened. They cannot awaken to the Truth on their own because “the barriers of their false views are heavy and the roots of their passions are deep.”<sup>87</sup> But this barrier is not insurmountable. These people need the right teachers to enlighten them. In a sense the teacher’s role would be similar to the role of a midwife: he does not give or add anything to the recipient; he merely aids the recipient in the latter’s self-realization.

Hui-neng’s famous question “where is Buddha?” is grounded on his assertion that the Buddha is in everyone’s mind. He says, “Our minds inherently have Buddha in them; your own inner Buddha is the real Buddha. If there were no Buddha-mind, where would we look for the real Buddha?”<sup>88</sup> He also says, “If you say you take refuge in Buddha, where is Buddha? If you do not see Buddha, where can you take refuge?”<sup>89</sup> Instead of seeking salvation from a Supreme Being from the outside, we need to seek “self-refuge.” The way to seek refuge in one’s self is simply to be moral and wise – to exemplify Buddhahood. “If you rectify your mind, it will always produce wisdom. Observe your own mind, stop evil, and do good; this is opening the knowledge and wisdom of Buddhahood for yourself.”<sup>90</sup> The teaching of “stopping all evil and doing all good” may seem so simple that even a three-year-old could understand, but to practice it faithfully would be hard even for a seventy-year-old who has spent all his or her life following this teaching. In this respect, becoming a Buddha is easier said than done. Ordinary people are simply Buddhas not yet enlightened, while Buddhas are simply enlightened ordinary people.<sup>91</sup>

In its new definition of “Buddha,” Chan Buddhism turns against the religious spirit of traditional Buddhism. A later Chan master, Lin Ji (Lin Chi), further denounces the supremacy of the historical Buddha. He criticizes other Buddhists in their promoting the Buddha as the “ultimate goal.” He asked, if that Buddha was the ultimate goal, then “where is the Buddha now?” Instead of portraying the Buddha’s departure from this world as a temporary exit (as the Hua-yan school does), Lin Ji says that the historical Buddha died too, and “from this we know clearly that he was no different from us in the realm of birth and death.”<sup>92</sup> In Lin Ji’s Chan, there is no Supreme Being; we are the ultimate beings ourselves. He asks:

When students today fail to make progress, where's the fault? The fault lies in the fact that they don't have faith in themselves! If you don't have faith in yourself, then you'll be forever in a hurry trying to keep up with everything around you, you'll be twisted and turned by whatever environment you're in and you can never move freely. But if you can just stop this mind that goes rushing around moment by moment looking for something, then you'll be no different from the patriarchs and the Buddhas.<sup>93</sup>

From the transmission of these teachings, Chan became very much a self-help practice and a moralistic philosophy.

As we have explained, the teaching of Chan is basically all about "seeing one's nature." This teaching can be called "the principle of realizing Buddhahood by seeing essential nature." Why is seeing one's nature so important? If enlightenment only requires one to see one's nature, then it does not seem unobtainable. In practice, however, seeing one's essential nature is not that easy. This principle obliges us to deny our personal identity, to embrace the principle of impartiality, to eliminate any distinction between others and us: love and hate; good and evil. To see our own essential nature, we must also see that everyone, and everything else, shares this nature with us. In other words, even inanimate things such as grass and stone are Buddhas – noble, supreme, inexhaustibly vast, and yet fundamentally empty. If we can truly adopt this attitude in treating everyone and every object, then according to the Chan School, we have realized Buddhahood.

Chan's ethical teaching is built on knowledge and wisdom – as long as we truly *see* that we are in essence and by nature Buddhas, we can immediately be morally transformed. It thus denies the gap between knowledge and action; all moral ills are attributed to lack of knowledge, to ignorance. It is a most fondly repeated story in the Chan tradition that once a butcher drops his butcher's knife, he is immediately turned into a Buddha. But in our real life experience, it is most often the case that our realization is momentary, while our old habits are hard to kick. After momentary awakening, we can easily slip back to our old way of thinking and acting. Suppose we have understood that those who harbor hostile feelings toward us are people who are worthy of our compassion, and we have made a resolution to forgive them. The minute we are directly insulted by someone, our rage surges and we completely forget our resolution. Suppose we have grasped the truth that external distinctions such as wealth and fame are insignificant, and we have vowed to pay attention only to the purity of our mind. As soon as we lose money or fail to get the promotion we think we deserve, we become so agitated that we allow our mind to lose its tranquility. Our habit-energy can be so ingrained in us that a momen-

tary awareness of our Buddha-nature cannot remove all the negative forms of habit-energy. The knowledge that we have pure Buddha-nature has to become a deeply entrenched “wisdom” in order for us really to alter our past habit-energy.

A method emphasized by Chan masters to preserve our pure, unperturbed mind is to focus on the present. Having a present-awareness can help us weed out unpleasant regrets about the past or disquieting concerns about the future. We can thereby enjoy the present moment more. A story was told about a man who, escaping from a tiger, slipped over a cliff and clung to a vine. He noticed that there was another tiger at the bottom waiting to devour him, and yet he could not climb up since the first tiger was still there. Worse still, there were two mice, one white, the other black (signifying day and night), gnawing on the vine that kept him suspended between two ill fates. At that moment, the man noticed a juicy strawberry on the side of the cliff and decided to enjoy it.<sup>94</sup> This story tells us that what is past is past and what is going to come will come; hence, we should try to enjoy our present moment and be mindful of whatever experience we currently have. If we can truly enjoy the present and not let the past or the future disturb our peace of mind, then we are in nirvana.

A curious phenomenon in the history of the Chinese Chan School is that different Chan masters often each claimed to have seen the true mind, while accusing one another of failing to see it. The dispute between the Northern School and the Southern School is a salient example. The disagreements did not cease with the flourishing of the Southern Chan. Even Lin Ji failed to understand what his teacher Huang Bo tried to convey.<sup>95</sup> If everyone has the same one mind, which everyone should be able to see immediately, then the lack of mutual understanding and agreement among those who have seen the true mind is difficult to explain. Either there is no “one same mind,” or it is simply impossible to convey to another person what one sees and knows. The Chan School generally embraces the second answer. Here we turn to its view on the possibility of knowledge and the limitations of language.

## Chan’s View on Knowledge and Language

The Chan School does not refute the possibility of knowledge, but it advocates a different form of knowledge. The proper objects of knowledge are not external things, but one’s own mind. In Chan’s theory of knowledge, knowledge about the external world and knowledge about other minds can only be mediated through knowledge about one’s own



mind. Because one knows one's mind, one thereby knows (i) other minds, since everyone shares the same mind; (ii) the external world, since every object in the world is produced by the mind's conceptualization. Under this epistemology, the object of knowledge is the subject's own mind. Therefore, the distinction between subject and object is eliminated. Furthermore, since one does not need an external medium in order to know one's own mind, descriptions and names become useless in this context. The Chan School clearly teaches that one has direct access to one's mind. This self-knowledge is different from the self-knowledge discussed in contemporary philosophy of mind, because what one directly knows in Chan's teaching is not one's thought, but one's mind in a state of "no-thought." It is not just knowledge about one's mind, but also knowledge about one's *original* mind.

In the *Platform Sutra*, Hong-ren is recorded as saying that direct awareness of one's original mind and nature does not require any thought. "People who have seen essential nature should see it the moment it is mentioned."<sup>96</sup> Suzuki interprets this form of knowledge as "intuitive knowledge."<sup>97</sup> He says:

[this form of intuition] is not derivative but primitive; not inferential, not rationalistic, nor mediational, but direct, immediate; not analytical but synthetic; not cognitive, but symbolical; not intending but merely expressive; not abstract, but concrete; not processional, not purposive, but factual and ultimate, final and irreducible; not eternally receding, but infinitely inclusive; etc.<sup>98</sup>

These descriptions may not help us understand what kind of knowledge it is, but they do suggest that Chan's epistemology is not about "knowledge" in the ordinary sense. It does not rely on language or conception. It cannot be taught or studied. When one achieves knowledge of one's original mind, one does not gain any information; one is simply "transformed." In Chan's terminology, one is immediately at one with the reality-as-such. This kind of experiential knowledge has to be personal and private. As a common Chan saying puts it: "It is just like someone drinking water: only he himself would know how cold or hot the water is."

Following the path of early Daoism and Buddhism, the Chan School also rejects the validity of language in its role of reference and description. The Chan School teaches that names and words are merely "temporary setups."<sup>99</sup> Reality in itself has no sign or label. Hui-neng says: "All verbal and literary expressions are like labels, like pointing fingers. Fingers and pointers mean shadows and echoes. You obtain a commodity by its label, and you see the moon by way of the pointing finger –

the moon is not the finger, the label is not the thing itself.”<sup>100</sup> In other words, we may use our names and conceptions to depict reality, just as we could use the finger to point at the moon. But we should not mistake our conceptual descriptions of the world for reality-as-it-is, just as we should not think that the finger has anything to do with the moon. The Chan School separates language and the world, and denies that language serves a truth-preserving function of the real aspect of the world.

A fundamental deficiency Chan masters find in language is that it is based on “discrimination.” Our concepts mark differences in categories of things; hence, we inescapably see things as different when we use language. Since the Chan School holds the view that everything is the same in their essence (nature), it would naturally reject the taxonomy we introduce through various concepts. The moment we use any basic form of language, we are already committed to the relativistic and divisionary mode of thinking. There is therefore an irreconcilable conflict between language and truth. The more one tries to speak of the truth, the farther removed one is from it; the more one tries to explain the truth, the less successful one is in getting others to see it.

But how do we communicate with each other if we cannot use language? How can Chan masters enlighten others if they do not speak? Speech is unavoidable, and thus the employment of language is a necessary evil. Chung-ying Cheng presents Chan’s rejection of language in theory and its reliance on language in practice as a “paradox.” He says:

The doctrine of [Chan] holds that no rational and intellectual doctrine is pertinent and necessary for the realization of the ultimate truth called Buddhahood. . . . Yet in their search for Enlightenment they produced a vivid and vigorous body of brief and pithy dialogic exchanges named “public cases” or “public documents” [*gong-an* in Chinese; *koan* in Japanese], which seem to defy intellectual understanding. One is thereby tempted to ask: Why is there a gap between theoretical training and practical life in [Chan]?<sup>101</sup>

This paradox has captured the interest of many contemporary commentators on Chan. In the final section, we shall take a look at how Chan masters produced a practical means of education in their theoretical commitment to the limitation of language.

## Chan’s Pedagogy

Over the years, Chan masters developed their mode of verbal communication, often in the form of short dialogues (called “*mondo*” in

Japanese), which is not always comprehensible if taken literally. Many contemporary commentators compare Chan masters' speech acts to what J. L. Austin calls "perlocutionary" speech acts.<sup>102</sup> Perlocutionary acts "are the acts a speaker performs, or desires to perform, *by* saying something."<sup>103</sup> In other words, perlocutionary acts are speeches that serve a special purpose of the speaker to elicit the intended response of the listener. It is a performance; the communication goes beyond the conveyance of information based on the literal meaning of the utterance. The success of such a communication depends not on whether the listener comprehends what the speaker says, but on whether the listener responds in the way the speaker intended. In the context of Chan, the use of language by Chan masters is intended to awaken the listener, to make him or her see the self-nature. Sometimes the perlocutionary goal is simply to "shock" the listener out of his habitual way of thinking. The format could be a riddle, a poem, a piece of nonsense, a shout, or simply silence. If it is true that Chan's language serves merely a perlocutionary function, then to understand it, we should discard semantics and appeal only to pragmatics. Or, as Ha Poong Kim argues, we should see that in Chan masters' utterances, words are *liberated* from the fixed roles they normally play within a particular language, and thus "they cease to *mean* anything – even if they may happen to be used in accordance with the rules of a language game."<sup>104</sup>

The use of language in Chan dialogues is inevitably an "expedient means," but to say that language is therefore a form of non-language or that words are not used as "words" would defy Chan's spirit of taking things naturally. The Chan School does not endorse the role of language in its function to depict reality. If the very nature of language, including all the conceptualizations as the basis of language, is fundamentally relativistic and discriminatory, then it cannot be used to refer to reality-as-such. But to refrain from using language as a normal discourse or to insist on silence would be like going back to the isolationist Chan that Hui-neng criticizes. But why then did many Chan masters refuse to answer questions directly? Their point is that if a student needs to ask someone else, then he or she has already missed the major point of Chan's teaching: one needs to see it for oneself. We should remember that Chan masters do not *always* resort to paradoxical dialogues; they sometimes do expound Chan's essence for students. But if a student insists on receiving a clear analysis of the meaning of certain concepts, then he or she is paying too much attention to language and conceptions themselves and forgetting what Chan is all about. Huang Bo says:

There is only the One Mind and not a particle of anything else on which to lay hold, for this Mind is the Buddha. If you students of the Way do not awake to this Mind substance, you will overlay Mind with conceptual thought, you will seek the Buddha outside yourselves, and you will remain attached to forms, pious practices and so on, all of which are harmful and not at all the way to supreme knowledge.<sup>105</sup>

So, Chan language is at times performative – in uttering nonsense or in giving irrelevant answers, Chan masters do not convey any information. Instead, their intention is that listeners should see the limit of language itself and try to gain true knowledge on their own. Language is like the finger pointing at the moon: one should see the moon and not just look at the finger. Furthermore, a Chan dialogue usually took place between a master and a student in a particular context, and what the master aimed at was to enlighten that student *at that moment*. The records of *koan* or *mondo* are futile in preserving the teaching of Chan. We do not gain any insight into what the master tried to convey since we are not the student being addressed, and we are no longer in that context. Therefore, we should not *overanalyze* the meaning of these paradoxical dialogues.

Some commentators on Chan take it to be a non-doctrinal school. However, the initial Chan School was not founded on a total rejection of doctrines and sutras. Hui-neng himself preached the *Diamond Sutra*, and he did not instruct his disciples not to study sutras.<sup>106</sup> But he clearly criticizes some followers for reciting sutras by heart without ever understanding their true meaning. He thinks that the essence of the Buddha's teaching "has nothing to do with written words."<sup>107</sup> Rather, it concerns "the original mind," and thus, "if one does not discern the original mind, it is of no benefit to study the teaching."<sup>108</sup>

Later Chan masters began to downplay the importance of studying sutras and learning doctrines, because they found words and conception major obstacles to seeing the true mind. Huang Bo says: "If you students of the Way wish to become Buddhas, you need study no doctrines whatever, but learn only how to avoid seeking for and attaching yourselves to anything."<sup>109</sup> The essence of Chan's teaching is all about seeing one's own mind, and this kind of self-knowledge cannot go through secondary conceptualization. This self-knowledge is immediate and direct. Conceptualization turns the mind into an "object" of knowledge, while for the mind to see itself, there is no separation of subject and object. That is why Huang Bo says: "Mind is the Buddha, while the cessation of conceptual thought is the Way."<sup>110</sup> "It is by preventing the



rise of conceptual thought that you will realize Bodhi (Enlightenment); and, when you do, you will just be realizing the Buddha who has always existed in your own mind!”<sup>111</sup>

If one cannot pass on the essence of Chan through verbal communication or written discourse, if Chan can only be transmitted “directly from one mind to another,” then the pedagogy has to be totally different from the traditional method of lecture and explication. As Huang Bo acknowledged, even though 500 people gathered on the mountain to listen to his sermon, few could fully understand his teaching. “Why? Because my Way is through Mind-awakening. How can it be conveyed in words?”<sup>112</sup> This explains why later Chan masters would resort to various extreme measures in their pedagogy. They do not explain; further, they do not “say things plainly,” because words and speech distract the mind away from the true goal of attainment: to see the mind itself.

Huang Bo’s follower Lin Ji was noted for “shouting” and “hitting” in answer to his students’ questions. To him these are pedagogical means. He says, “I don’t have a particle of Dharma [True Teaching] to give to anyone. All I have is cure for sickness, freedom from bondage.”<sup>113</sup> He said that no one had ever come to him “alone and free,” and what he tried to do was to break everyone’s bondage. “If they come with a raised hand, I hit the raised hand; if they come mouthing something, I hit them in the mouth; if they come making motions with their eyes, I hit them in the eye.”<sup>114</sup> To those outside the Chan School, these methods often seemed ridiculous and even cruel. But to Chan masters, the method one uses is unimportant – what matters is whether the students understand the point right away.

One hundred and fifty years after Hui-neng’s death, the Chan School turned itself into a school known for using *koan*, riddles, shouting, beating, and many other unconventional means of teaching. Suzuki describes the change of Chan’s pedagogy this way:

The scene has almost entirely changed from that which was visible until the time of the Sixth Patriarch. Only what may be called Sutra terminology had been in use in the exposition of Zen. No one had ever thought that beating, kicking, and other rough methods of treatment would be accorded to the students. “Mere seeing” is gone, and acting has taken its place.<sup>115</sup>

But since the nature of the Chan masters’ performance is “acting,” it is sometimes difficult for outsiders to gauge the real intent behind the acts. When we read records of later generations of Chan masters, we can be quite amazed at the seeming indolence, violence, rudeness, and scorn

they demonstrate toward their students or each other. In Suzuki's opinion, these techniques are "so varied, so original, so entirely unconventional, that each time we come across them we feel thoroughly refreshed, and frequently as if resurrected from the grave."<sup>116</sup>

## Conclusion

Chan's claim that the Buddha is within us and that all we need to do is to see our essential nature is liberating to those with a religious bent. As a form of religion, it does not posit any Supreme Being who is responsible for our wellbeing; who assigns punishments and rewards for our deeds. It does not ask us to give up our will to obey an external, superior commandment. It does not insist on our studying any sacred text or memorizing any sacrosanct precept. All it teaches is a simple method of recognizing one's self-nature and appreciating the fact that other beings all share the same essential nature that one has. Its teaching reinforces self-confidence and at the same time cautions against arrogance or conceit. The pragmatic goal of this school is very society-friendly.

As a form of philosophy, on the other hand, Chan is less systematic than the other schools of Chinese Buddhism that we have studied. Its philosophy can be encapsulated in a few short aphorisms, but Chan masters seldom defended or put forward arguments for their theses. We have to extrapolate their philosophical presuppositions from their remarks. One of the most important philosophical claims of the Chan School is that we do not need to reject the phenomenal world totally in order to reach nirvana. Even though they place utmost emphasis on the mind, they do not insist that all worldly phenomena are illusions or productions of the mind. In this respect, the Chan School, along with the Tian-tai School, takes Chinese Buddhism farther away from the anti-realistic spirit of traditional Buddhism. Chan asserts reality, but it is not a form of naive realism, which is the common people's view that Buddhism rejects. Dan Lusthaus puts it well: "Chan is not a naive realism; it is a kind of intuitive phenomenology. One should not mistake the rejection of transcendental metaphysics for a naïve realism – that would be to fall to the other pole of the dichotomy Chan seeks to erase."<sup>117</sup>

Another important philosophical thesis of the Chan School is the universality of Buddhahood. Buddhahood is innate to all beings; it defines the essence of everything in the universe. Humans are not superior to other species of animals; rocks and stones are not less significant than

cats and dogs. This acknowledgment of the universality of Buddhahood reinstates the traditional Chinese conviction of a harmonious, holistic universe, in which everything and everyone plays a crucial role.

The Chan School stands at the pivotal point between ancient Chinese philosophy and Neo-Confucianism. Whalen Lai thinks that its theory of mind “borrowed a [Daoist] concept of mind,” its theory of Buddha-nature “incorporates the mind-nature association made by Mencius,” and that it “thereby anticipated the philosophy of Wang Yang-ming.”<sup>118</sup> According to Lai, the very choice of the word “nature” (“*xing*” in Chinese) as the translation for the Sanskrit word “*gotra*” (meaning “seed”) or “*garbha*” (meaning “womb”) “was influenced by the popularity of this term in Chinese philosophical usage.”<sup>119</sup> The theory of Buddha-nature thus reflects the Chinese tradition. Later in the history of Chinese philosophy, Wang Yangming, deeply influenced by the Chan School’s theory of mind, developed his philosophy of mind to a more sophisticated level.

### Further discussion questions

- 1 Between the Northern School’s conception of mind and the Southern School’s conception of mind, which view is closer to your understanding of our mind?
- 2 How can Chan’s teachings be applied to today’s lifestyle? How can we achieve the nondiscriminatory state of mind? How would this attitude affect human relationships?
- 3 What does “everyone is a Buddha” mean? How do you assess the truth of this claim?
- 4 Do you agree that in depicting reality with our languages and in cognizing the world with our conceptions, we inevitably create a world according to human conception and consequently a “world-not-in-itself”? What could reality-in-itself be without human conception?
- 5 How do you compare Daoism (especially Zhuangzi’s philosophy) to Chan? Can this kind of teaching reform society?

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