

Historical Foundations of Chan (Zen) Buddhism

Introduction

Chan (JP. Zen) took form as a Buddhist tradition over a thousand year period in medieval China (ca. 200-1200 CE).¹ A widely taken-for-granted account of this development is a continuous lineal string of great patriarchs like Bodhidharma (the first patriarch of Chan in China) and Hui-neng (the sixth patriarch), whose enlightened insight was considered the same as that of the Buddha, for it was traceable back to the Buddha directly from one patriarch to another “outside words and letters.” Notwithstanding the allure of this account, it is a myth; the lineage scheme was not firmly in place until the 8th century, and great patriarchs like Bodhidharma and Hui-neng seem fictionalized exemplars of an idealized religious identity, an identity aimed at legitimizing and promoting certain individuals and movements within an internally contentious, emerging tradition.

With the veil of myth removed, the foundations of Chan become more interesting, if more complex and uncertain, than the myth. John McRae in *Seeing Through Zen* expresses this complexity in four rules of Zen (Chan) studies in early China: It’s not true, and therefore it’s more important; Lineage assertions are as wrong as they are strong; Precision implies uncertainty; and Romanticism breeds cynicism.² This primer uses McRae’s provisional phases of the development of the tradition in *Seeing Through Zen* as a framework for summarizing current ideas about the historical foundations of Chan (Zen) Buddhism.

Early Buddhism in China (ca. 100-500 CE)

It is not clear when and how Buddhism first entered China, but extensive overland contacts existed with Buddhist centers to the west by the 2nd century CE, suggesting that Buddhism entered China a century or more earlier.³ The likely main overland route of its entrance was a northern Silk Road that carried merchants and traders, and likely missionaries, back and forth between China and Central Asia.⁴ The transmission of the dharma along the route was facilitated by the control of the region first by the powerful Greco-Bactrian Kingdom (250-125 BCE) and later the Indo-Greek Kingdom (180 BCE-10 CE), both of which supported the practice of Greco-Buddhism. The route was for the most part closed by the 8th century following Muslim conquests of the area, after which the emerging traditions of Buddhism in India and China developed largely independent of each other. A less documented southern route that moved overland and by sea through Southeast Asia may have reached southern China by the 2nd century as well.

It is not clear at present which version of Buddhism was practiced in China at this time, but translators, mainly from Central Asia, were translating both mainstream Buddhist and Mahayana texts into Chinese by the 2nd century, and dozens if not hundreds of Chinese pilgrims made the trip westward to India and Central Asia in search of texts and teachings throughout the first millennium CE.⁵ By the early 7th century nearly all basic Buddhist texts had been translated into Chinese. According to tradition, the Buddha’s teachings were mainly approached through a scholastic concentration on these texts, most of which had been translated into Chinese using familiar Taoist terms, many of which, however, had misleading Taoist connotations that obscured the Buddha’s original intent.

Proto-Chan (ca. 500-600)

According to treasured legend, the Buddha's true teachings were first transmitted to China by Bodhidharma (ca. 470-543?), a south Indian prince who was the 28th in a direct series of patriarchs back to the Buddha; he in turn became the first patriarch of Chinese Chan. In contrast to the supposed superficial understanding of Buddhism at the time in China, Bodhidharma taught: the essence of Buddhism is a teaching outside of "words and letters" directly from master to disciple as part of an interactive event (vs. individual endeavor); enlightenment is available to anyone if they can see into their own true nature (mind), which is already enlightened (our Buddha-nature); this can be accomplished by concentration meditation ("wall gazing"). But Bodhidharma was atypical of later Chan masters, too. For example, he promoted reliance on a sutra (the *Lankavatara*), and spoke simply and clearly about the teachings, in contrast to the obscure, paradoxical sayings of his successors who at least publicly considered textual studies an unnecessary distraction.

Despite the myth, Buddhism in China may not have been as superficial and misguided as claimed before Bodhidharma's arrival. Kumārajīva (343-413), China's most important translator of Sanskrit texts and a distinguished Mahayana scholar, successfully spread the Madhyamika school in China, clarified the real Buddhist meaning of terms that had earlier been obscured by misleading Taoist interpretations, and skillfully harmonized India Buddhist ideas into familiar Taoist Chinese patterns of thought. His associate Tao-sheng (355-434) and disciple Seng-chao (374-414) had also already proposed that the reality of Buddha-nature is not different from the world of appearances, all beings possess a Buddha-nature that can be realized through sudden enlightenment, and that samsara and nirvana are not separate. They were also instrumental in turning the negative Indian view in Prajnaparamita texts into a more positive, Chinese view of reality.

Bodhidharma himself may well represent a "virtual focus" of a myth, an obscure person around which biographical details can be added in response to the needs of later generations.⁶ It seems that when later masters created the Chan lineage system and were in need of a first patriarch, Bodhidharma was chosen, much like Hui-neng became the "virtual focus" of a myth during the following Early Chan phase. In the process Bodhidharma was transformed into an iconoclastic master who showed a disregard for conventional representations of Buddhism, in fact the epitome of what became in Chan the ideal image of enlightened sagehood.

Bodhidharma's teachings are thought to be most reliably recorded in the *Treatise on the Two Entrances and Four Practices*, a text prepared by a monk named Tamlin, perhaps at the direction of Huike, Bodhidharma's disciple and successor, after Bodhidharma's death.⁷ In brief, Bodhidharma's teachings and practice focused on meditation, ascetic practices, and the *Lankavatara Sutra*, which Bodhidharma gave to Huike telling him everything he needed to know about becoming enlightened was in the sutra.⁸ The patriarchal succession passed from Huike (487-593), to Sengcan (d. 606), to Daoxin (580-651), to Hongren (601-674), and then to Huineng (638-713), the sixth Patriarch. At the time there was no known lineage theory and Chan was loosely dispersed at a number of locations in northern China.

Early Chan (ca. 600-900)

Distinguishing characteristics of Early Chan include: a great deal of experimentation in how to most effectively present the teachings; development of a unifying ideology centered on a lineage system traceable back to the Buddha; a greater stability of location, especially at the provincial center at Huangmei, where Hongren, the fifth ancestor, concentrated on teaching meditation practices; the movement of many of Hongren's students to the imperial centers of Chang'an and Luoyang, the world's greatest urban centers at the time; a great growth in

Chan community development throughout the 7th and 8th centuries; and the presence of competing Chan factions (Northern, Southern, and Oxhead).⁹ It was also a period of great political unrest, particularly in the north, with the collapse of the Tang dynasty (755-63), the Lushan (755-63) and Huang Chao (875-84) rebellions, and the persecution of Buddhism by the Chinese government in the Huichang period (beginning in 845).

Other occurrences include: an emphasis on clarity in what was being taught, especially by the use of catch phrases like “maintaining mind” and “viewing the mind”; a rejection of most traditional methods of meditation; a focus on conscious awareness (the mind) itself rather than on the afflictions that cloud one’s Buddha-nature; development of simpler meditation practices for laypersons not trained in Buddhist doctrine; and harsh polemical attacks by members of the Southern school (in particular by Shenhui) and its “sudden” approach to enlightenment (the “subitist” position) against a fabricated Northern school’s (and Shenxiu) “gradual” approach.¹⁰ Neither school, as such, survived the persecution of Buddhism of 845, but by that time Shen-hui’s rhetoric of sudden enlightenment had become the norm for all subsequent Chan schools, mainly because of the dualistic implication of the gradual approach (e.g., delusion as separate, different from, and preceding enlightenment).

Important Early Chan texts include *Treatise on the Essentials of Cultivating the Mind* (early 8th C), which is attributed to Hongren, and *The Platform Sutra* (ca. 780), the climax text of the phase, which is attributed to Hui-neng, the Sixth Patriarch.¹¹ The earlier *Treatise on the Two Entrances and Four Practices* was ignored as time passed, for it was considered too straightforward and lacked the rhetorical flourishes that became a hallmark of Chan from this phase on. Among the central teachings of the texts are: our Buddha-nature (Pure Mind) is a treasure within us that can be obscured by discursive thought; engage in contemplative practices that concentrate on the mental processes within; avoid putting too much emphasis on achieving nirvana; and concentrate on enlightened actions in daily life, not on ultimate realization. There was a rapid acculturation (sinification) to Chinese cultural practices and ways of thinking, including Taoism, during the phase, and a shift in importance from the *Lankavatara Sutra* to the *Diamond Sutra* as a source of ideal teachings.

Middle Chan (ca. 750-1000)

According to later Song period (960-1281) legends, the Zen masters of late medieval China during the Tang (618-901) were a radical group who lived on the margins of Buddhist society working with common people in the fields. It was the “Golden Age” of Chan in which masters engaged in “encounter dialogues” with each other and students that became the heart of later koan literature. Of course, nothing could be further from the truth. The four great masters of the phase – Ma-tzu (709-788), Pai-chang (749-814), Huang-po (d. 850), and Lin-chi (810-866) – were leaders of an elitist contemplative tradition that became for the first time a truly empire-wide Chan tradition centered on fairly conventional but elite monastic communities well-supported by the state and gentry families.¹² By replacing the multitude of earlier Chan traditions and solidifying its position within elite society, Middle Chan was a significant phase in the development of Chan as a foremost Buddhist tradition in China and later throughout the world.

Interpretations of Middle Chan as a radical movement away from traditional Buddhist teachings are also a myth, for the teachings, especially in Ma-tzu’s Hongzhou school, shared a common religious outlook with other schools and movements of Buddhism in China at the time. These outlooks were grounded in the core tenets of Mahayana Buddhism and the religious ethos of medieval Chinese monasticism. What was distinctive was the expression of key doctrinal propositions in new idioms (“Mind is Buddha,” “Ordinary Mind as the

Way”), its emphasis on practice rather than on conceptual schemes (as in Hua yen), its further acculturation to Chinese values and views, and its emphasis on doctrinal pragmatics (i.e., presentation of its spiritual message in a manner non-monastics could readily understand). Key Mahayana themes included: the rejection of all forms of dogmatism; the presentation of stages in the development of a deeper insight into the nature of reality; the cultivation of nonattachment; the understanding of religious teachings as *upaya* (skillful means); the idea of an essential identity between the mind of the Buddha and that of ordinary people, which is the notion of a shared Buddha-nature; and the idea of the emptiness of both persons and things. These themes and their manner of presentation greatly appealed to the elite and brought great prominence to Chan in China at the time.

Song-Dynasty Chan (ca. 950-1300).

Chan was fully restored during the Song Dynasty (960-1279) following the collapse of the Tang and a tumultuous, strife-filled period called the Five Dynasties (907-960).¹³ Five “houses” of Chan emerged after the Great Persecution of 845, with only two, the Caodong (JP. Soto) and the Linji (JP. Rinzai), surviving the period. The Caodong, which was developed together by Dongshan (807-869) and Caoshan (840-901), was a further development of the Northern school’s Silent Illumination approach. A prominent Linji monk, Dahui Zonggao (1089-1163), perfected the koan technique and was a persistent critic of Caodong teachings, much in the manner of Shenhui earlier. While the two schools agreed that their ultimate concern was enlightenment, they disagreed, often strongly, about how to achieve that goal. While Caodong masters stressed quiet meditation, intellectual inquiry, and stages of enlightenment, Linji masters emphasized mind-disrupting techniques like sudden shouts and blows that were intended to shatter one’s discursive thought and open the window of intuition.

It was during the Song that stories of encounters of older masters were refurbished or invented and organized, beginning by the middle of the 10th century, into collections that included comments or verse by more recent masters. The two major collections were the Blue Cliff Record, assembled by Xuedou Zhongxian (980-1052), and the Mumonkan (Gateless Gate), assembled in 1228 by Wu-men Hui-K’ai (1183-1260). When included in a system of study, a koan was to be meditated upon with the goal of arriving at an intuitive “answer” (not a rational one) acceptable to a Chan master.

It was these two schools of Chan that were transmitted to Japan, Linji (Rinzai) by Japanese master Eisai (1141-1215) and Caodong (Soto) by Dogen Zenji (1200-1253). It is mainly because of the spread of Chan throughout East Asia at this time that Song Dynasty Chan is considered the climax stage of Chan in China, though mature forms of Chan already had deep roots in the earlier teachings of Ma-tsu and others in Middle Chan.

Trends in the Historical Development of Chan Buddhism

1. A gradual acculturation (sinification) to Chinese practices and worldviews.
2. An increasingly independent development from India with the gradual closing of the Silk Road between the 5th and 8th centuries.
3. An increasingly intricate intermeshing with Taoism.¹⁴
4. Continuing adjustments to secular political, social, and economic forces.
5. The development of factions revolving around the practices of “gradual” and sudden” enlightenment.
6. Tensions between southern and northern Chinese mind sets and cultures.

7. A gradual abandonment of any pretense of traditional Buddhism.
8. A gradual shift from asking what enlightenment is to concern with processes of its attainment.
9. A growing emphasis on the nature of mind, rather than on scriptures.
10. A growing modern-day disjunction between received myth and the revelations of the Dunhuang Library Cave historical documents.¹⁵

Notes

1. For overviews at different levels of complexity and adherence to traditionalist beliefs, see Ferguson (2000), McRae (2003), Zürcher (2006), and the Ashoka online course: *The Story of Zen*. Also see Heine and Wright (2005). This is a vast topic that is only briefly skimmed here.
2. McRae (2003: xix-xx). Cole (2009) takes a more manipulative, less “therefore it’s more important,” view.
3. It is thought that Emperor Asoka sent missionaries to China, but there is no specific textual or archaeological evidence to confirm this; but, if so, the impact was probably low key.
4. For accessible recent overviews of the Silk Road, see Hill (2015) and Whitfield et al. (2015).
5. The first documented translation of Buddhist scriptures into Chinese occurred in 148 CE by Anshigao. Lakaksema, a Kushan monk, first translated and distributed Mahayana texts in 164-186. One of the most important of these translators was Kumarajiva (343-413), a Kuchean monk (Nattier 2008). Of the multitude of pilgrims who made the trip, written accounts of their trip by Faxian (395-414), Xuanzang (629-644), and Yijing (671-695) are the only ones to survive, or so it seems (Sen 2006).
6. McRae (2003:23). For Bodhidharma as a fabricated figurehead, see McRae (2003:22-44) and Faure (1986).
7. McRae (1986:101-117). For the texts, see Broughton (1999) and Red Pine (1989). Harada (2000) provides a more recent but still traditional interpretation.
8. The *Lankavatara Sutra* is a difficult Mahayana text that was an important teaching passed down by Bodhidharma to and by his disciples. Its importance is exemplified by references to Early Chan as the “Lankavatara School.” For a translation and commentary, see Red Pine (2012).
9. McRae (2003: 33-73). For 8th century versions of the lineage system, see *Record of Masters and Disciples of the Lankavatara Sutra* and *Record of the Successive Generations of the Dharma Treasure*.
10. For detailed studies of the Northern “Gradual” school and Southern “Sudden” school during this period, see McRae (1986) and Gregory (2002), respectively. Also see Gregory (1987).
11. For the *Platform Sutra*, see the primer in this MZMC series.
12. For Ma-tsu, see Poleski (2007, 2015); for Pai-chang, Huai-hai and Cleary (1978); for Huang-po, Blofeld and Hsiu (1994); for Linji, Kirchner and Sasaki (2009), and Broughton (2012). The Chan Dharma was also expressed in poetry, paintings, and other media forms. For a classic Tang period poet, see Han-shan and Watson (1971).
13. For Song Dynasty Chan, see Gregory and Getz (1999), and Schlütter (2008).
14. On the interplay between Buddhism and Taoism, see Mollier (2009).
15. The Dunhuang Library Cave in a northwest China oasis at the end of the Silk Road contained many thousands of historical documents dating between 406 and 1002.

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