

# The Platform Sutra

## Introduction

*The Platform Sutra of the Sixth Patriarch* is one of the most popular and influential texts of the Chinese Chan (Zen in Japanese) Buddhist tradition. For many Buddhist teachers and scholars, it is considered the hallmark and culminating text of Early Chan (ca. 600-900).<sup>1</sup> The sutra describes the life and teachings of Huineng (638-713), the sixth patriarch of the Chan tradition, as purportedly recorded by Fa-hai, one of his disciples. The Platform Sutra is both innovative and provocative because it challenges traditional ideas at the time about enlightenment, meditation, spiritual cultivation, and other aspects of traditional Buddhist teachings. Though initially provocative, it eventually brought some unity to Chan thought and practice, and established trends that were more thoroughly developed in the Middle Chan (ca. 750-1000) and Song-Dynasty Chan (ca. 950-1300) periods. Although the earliest known version of the text is thought to date to around 780, about a century after the events it describes occurred, it was altered and updated into the late thirteenth century.<sup>2</sup> The word ‘platform’ in the title refers to the raised podium on which Huineng sat during the ordination ceremony recorded in the sutra.

Though the events portrayed in the sutra are still widely accepted as factual by practitioners, modern scholarship has convincingly demonstrated that they were fabricated to promote a particular view of Chan thought and practice. These include the life story and teachings of Huineng, a conflict between Northern and Southern schools of Chan, and the authorship of the sutra itself. The sutra thus has a background of intrigue not apparent in other sutras, though the teachings remain highly valued.<sup>3</sup>

This primer reviews the history of the sutra, its organization, the sutra as the culmination of Early Chan teachings, and its contributions to later Chan practice and thought. It concludes with lingering questions about the intent of its creation and the origin of its ideology. Notes and readings are included for readers interested in looking more deeply into this seminal sutra.

## History

The origins of the *Platform Sutra* are not clear, both to when it was first written and who the author or authors were. The oldest texts available are two handwritten versions found near the town of Tunhuang/Dunhuang in northwestern China. They are referred to as the Tunhuang Cave version and the Tunhuang Museum version, reflecting where they were discovered. Both versions likely date in origin to somewhere in the eight century to the middle of the ninth century, though the consensus at present is that they are based on an edition from about 780, which may date the origin of the sutra (note the “mays” and “thought to be” here). Later versions were created by the Chinese scholar-monk Qisang in 1056 and by Zonghao in 1291, and by others.<sup>4</sup> Each version differs somewhat in organization and content. Though the Zonghao edition became part of the Ming Dynasty Chinese Buddhist canon and thus the most frequently referred to version by thousands of Buddhist practitioners, recent scholarship has concentrated on the two earlier Tunhuang versions because they date closer to the events described in the sutra.<sup>5</sup> Nonetheless, when viewed as a resource for the study of the development of Chan Buddhism between the eighth and thirteenth centuries, the multiple versions of the sutra deserve close attention.

Though the original manuscript is attributed to notes taken at events by Fa-hai, a disciple of Huineng, that attribution is considered highly unlikely. The sutra is more likely based in part on a polemic by Shenhui (624-758), a later evangelist and gifted storyteller who promoted the little known Huineng as the sixth patriarch and instigated the Northern-Southern school dispute, and other less polemical authors.<sup>6</sup> Just what Shenhui's intent was is debated, but he may have been promoting his own version of Chan thought and practice, championing south China culture over that of north China, and perhaps positioning himself to become the seventh patriarch. Parts of the original manuscript may have been written by Shenhui's disciples after his death, for many teachings in the sermon are verbatim records of sermons preached by Shenhui, with other parts or versions possibly written by members of an Oxhead school of Chan, who were trying to resolve doctrinal crises at the time between the Northern and Southern schools.<sup>7</sup> Regardless of who actually wrote the sutra and exactly when it was written, it was written during a time of vigorous debate within the developing Chan school over such issues as who the real sixth patriarch was, what the true Chan teachings were, and how the newly formulated Chan lineage of patriarchs going back to the historic Buddha could be most effectively incorporated into their teachings. All of this turmoil and intrigue resulted in what one scholar has called "a brilliant consummation of early Chan, a masterpiece that created a new understanding of the past even as it pointed the way to a new style of Chan practice."<sup>8</sup>

Like other sutras, the popularity of the Platform Sutra has fluctuated through time. At first of pivotal importance in the Early and Middle Chan periods in China, it eventually faded in importance during the later Song-Dynasty period in China and the Kamakura period (ca.1185-1392) in Japan. Today, the sutra is of enormous importance in Chan and Zen communities throughout the world, where it is considered a foundational text of Chan/Zen.

## **Organization**

Through time the organization and content of the sutra varied. The Tsungpao version has been divided into ten chapters and the Tunhuang versions into 57 sections. In the Tsungpao version, Chapter 1 relates the well-known and much beloved story of the contest for the successor to Hongren, the fifth patriarch, between Huineng and Shenxiu; Chapter 2 describes a bodhisattva ordination ceremony during which the audience was asked by Huineng to perceive the three bodies of the Buddha within themselves, to accept the four bodhisattva vows, undergo a formless confession, and receive the precepts in the three refuges, followed by a sermon explaining the perfection of wisdom (prajnaparamita) teachings; Chapter 3 describes a question-and-answer session between Huineng and a lay audience; Chapter 4 is a lecture on meditation and wisdom, and Chapter 5 a lecture on seated meditation; Chapter 6 describes a ceremony of repentance; Chapter 7 includes encounter stories and dialogues, and Chapter 8 encounter stories and dialogue about sudden and gradual enlightenment; Chapter 9 tells of the time when Huineng was summoned to the imperial court to visit the Emperor and declined; and Chapter 10 summaries Huineng's final instructions to his ten most accomplished disciples on how to teach the dharma (the instructions concentrate on the concept of Namarupa, the Buddha's teachings on the five skandhas, and Yogacara teachings). Huineng's voice is heard in the first two chapters and Fa-hai's as narrator in the last eight chapters. Red Pine divides the 57 sections of the Tunhuang Museum version into four parts, which he assigns different dates of origin to.

The earliest section in all versions recounts the dramatic and cherished underdog legend of how Huineng, an illiterate woodcutter, bested Shenxiu (606?-706), a learned and privileged

monk, in a challenge of mind-verses to determine who would become the sixth patriarch, the successor of Hongren, the fifth patriarch. Shenxiu's verse, which is cast as representing a Northern gradual approach to enlightenment, was: "The body is the *bodhi* tree/The mind is like a bright mirror's stand/At all times we must strive to polish it/And must not let dust collect." Huineng's verse, which is cast as representing a Southern sudden approach to enlightenment, was: "*Bodhi* originally has no tree/The mirror also has no stand/The Buddha-nature is/always clear and pure/Where is there room for dust?"

Although the account is a fabrication, its purpose was to establish the preeminence of the notions of enlightenment and transmission in Chan thought and practice, and it clearly reflects the ideological struggles taking place within Early Chan.<sup>9</sup>

### **As the Culmination of Early Chan Teachings**

The sutra is widely regarded as the culmination or consummation of Early Chan teachings. Besides providing a new understanding of the history of Chan, it gives already established ideas a new and often radical but inspired turn that, while initially considered controversial, was eventually accepted and unified Early Chan ideology.<sup>10</sup>

Two prominent changes in the received view of the history of Chan are the establishment of Huineng, who was little known before the sutra, as sixth patriarch and a straight-line lineage of patriarchs that stretch back to Shakyamuni Buddha.

Three key ideas in the sutra that came to define Early Chan involve the notions of transmission, ordination, and enlightenment:

1. **Transmission occurs from mind to mind.** Transmission was now understood to take place not through the study of orthodox Buddhist scriptures, but from mind to mind. Underlying this understanding is the conviction that truth is not dependent upon established doctrine.<sup>11</sup>
2. **Both monastics and lay people can receive ordination.** Ordination refers here to a public ceremony in which lay Buddhists and monastics receive precepts. In the sutra Huineng confers the Formless precepts on the large lay audience that has gathered to hear his sermon. Unlike traditional Buddhist precepts whose intent is to change one's behavior, the Formless precepts are reminders that everyone already manifests perfect Buddhahood. The fact that lay people can receive precepts during an ordination ceremony reflects the growing importance of lay people within Chan.<sup>12</sup>
3. **Enlightenment occurs suddenly and completely.** Rather than the result of gradual study and practice (the purported method of the Northern school), enlightenment occurs suddenly and completely, as reflected in Huineng's verse. It is 'a flash of direct, intuitive understanding.' This dispute reflects the reemergence of enlightenment as the main goal of practice rather than nirvana, which marks the end of suffering and rebirth.<sup>13</sup>

Other frequently discussed teachings are (with relevant sections in Red Pine's *The Platform Sutra* in parentheses): take refuge in your own nature, for "If you don't take refuge in your own nature, there's no other place of refuge" (23); "One Practice Samadhi means at all times, whether walking, standing, sitting, or lying down, always practicing with a straightforward mind" (14); no attachment is our foundation, so "Thought after thought, [do] not ... become attached" (17); no thought is our doctrine – "To be unaffected by any object is what is meant by no thought" (17); meditate while sitting, standing, lying down, or walking; it's OK to use vernacular dialogue in interactions with students (the sutra is one of the earliest examples in the Chan tradition in which

vernacular dialogue is used in exchanges between a master and students; ‘things’ are empty of self-existence (the importance of the doctrine of emptiness in the sutra is reflected in part by a shift in reliance from the *Lankavatara Sutra* to the *Diamond Sutra*, which Huineng uses as the basis of his teaching; 24).

For the most part, these ideas have antecedents in Early Chan teachings, Buddhism more generally, and other East Asian spiritual traditions, especially Taoism.<sup>14</sup>

### **Pointing the Way to a New Style of Chan Practice and Thought**

While the Platform Sutra was the culmination of Early Chan thought and practice, Chan as a tradition continued to evolve after the first appearance of the sutra, as reflected in the frequent updating’s of the sutra itself. In the words of a Chan scholar, “there’s a sense in which the subsequent evolution of Chan passed the *Platform Sutra* by; that is, the text helped set the stage for the emergence of encounter dialogue as a mode of spiritual cultivation, but it represents more the gradual culmination of one era than a scripture for all seasons.”<sup>15</sup> The “new style of Chan practice and thought” referred to in the title of this section is encounter dialogue, the basis of which eventually led to the development of koans as a method for seeing things as they really are in later periods.

### **Lingering Questions**

The first of John McRae’s rules of Chan studies is, “It’s not true, and therefore it’s more important.”<sup>16</sup> His reasoning is that asking, “Did it really happen?” is too simpleminded, for the creation of Chan legends involved thousands of people, and the vast and deep religious imagination of the Chinese. As has been demonstrated, many if not most of the Platform Sutra is a brilliant fabrication, but a fabrication for sure. A lingering question (as blasphemous as it may be) is, Is the sutra therefore “more important”? What was the intent of the many authors who wrote the sutra? Does it reflect political and cultural strife, and personal ambition, or pure spiritual insight?

A second lingering question is, Is the *Platform Sutra* Buddhism and, more generally, Is Zen Buddhism? In early Chinese philosophy major religious traditions like Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism mutually influenced each other more deeply and more fluidly than was the case in the West. Some scholars have even concluded that Zen is more rightly a form of Taoism than Buddhism. One commentator insists, for example, “Zen is Taoism disguised as Buddhism.”<sup>17</sup> The suggestion is that if it was not for the creation of the lineage system that links Chan patriarchs to Shakyamuni Buddha (a legitimizing move, it is asserted), Zen would still be considered Taoist. Consider these lines from Lao Tsu’s *Tao Te Ching*: “Those who know do not talk. Those who talk do not know; The Tao that can be told is not the eternal Tao. The name that can be named is not the eternal name. Understanding and being open to all things, are you able to do nothing?; Look, it cannot be seen – it is beyond form. Listen, it cannot be heard – it is beyond sound. Grasp, it cannot be held – it is intangible.” Sound familiar! The same author insists that ideas in Zen like wordlessness, selflessness, oneness, emptiness, paradox, non-doing, and suchness were influenced by, if not instigated by, Taoism in order to make Buddhist ideas more compatible with the Chinese mind.

Regardless of the correctness of any of these assertions, the historical origins, intent of its authors, and source of its ideas remain foggy. Nonetheless, the Platform Sutra remains a formative and inspiring text in the Chan/Zen tradition.

## Notes

1. For general introductions and studies of the *Platform Sutra*, see Yampolsky (1967), McRae (2000a, 2003:45-73), Red Pine (2006), and Schlütter and Teiser (2012). For an overview of the historical setting of Chan in China at the time of the writing of the sutra, see Schlütter (2012).
2. For the genealogy of the sutra, see: Schlütter (1989).
3. Red Pine's (2006:61) comment on the significance of these revelations is a typical attitude: "We know that if this book does not contain the words of Hui-neng, it at least contains the words of someone who was his equal as a teacher of Zen. This has been attested by millions of practitioners who have used this book as their spiritual guide for more than a thousand years."
4. For an accessible review of versions of the sutra, see Red Pine (2006:53-59).
5. Two widely read examples are Yampolsky (1967), which is based on the Tunhuang Cave version, and Red Pine (2006), which is based on the Tunhuang Museum version, though Red Pine usefully includes comments on other versions.
6. McRae (1987, 2002).
7. For the Oxhead school, see McRae (1983, 2003:56-60).
8. McRae (2003:60).
9. For a commentary on the verses, see McRae (2003:63-65),
10. Sheng-yen (1992),
11. Adamek (2012), Schlütter (2007).
12. Groner (2012).
13. Gregory (1987, 2012), Schlütter (2007).
14. For explorations of the Buddhist antecedents of the sutra, see Sheng-yen (1992),
15. McRae (2003:66). Also see McRae (2000b). For informative studies of later Chan in Song-Dynasty China, see Schlütter (2008) and McRae (2003).
16. McRae (2003:xix).
17. Grigg (1994). For the broader charge that Zen is not Buddhism or at least contains harmful practices, see Swanson (1993), Hubbardt and Swanson (1997), and Shields (2011). For the Eastern philosophy context, see Ziporyn (2012) and Ram-Prasad (2005).

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