

Chan and “Emptiness” (*sunyatâ*)

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Chan and Buddhist Meditation



The word “ch’an,” from which Chan Buddhism or Zen Buddhism takes its name, is a Chinese transliteration of the Indian Buddhist term *dhyāna*, meaning “meditative concentration” or “meditative practice.” Applied specifically to the Chan or Zen school, it carries the particular sense of the cultivation and experience of enlightenment itself, not just any sort of meditative experience. Thus Chan or Zen Buddhism is often characterized as the school of meditative experience qua enlightened insight par excellence, for it claims to embody and transmit the living wisdom that Siddhārtha Gautama achieved when he became the Buddha or “enlightened one.”

As the timeless insight that informed the Buddha’s fashioning and preaching of the Buddhist doctrine, this enlightenment can be said to both precede and “stand apart from” the spoken word of the Buddhist sūtras. But at the same time, it is immanent to the sūtras and the spo-

ken Dharma as the very subject around which they orbit. For the scriptures both take it as their foundation and aspire to point the way back to it, as a finger might point to the moon or a raft be constructed to help one reach the other shore. The living wisdom to which the Buddha awakened and to which his spoken teachings aspire is the heart of Buddhist tradition in all its forms.

This being the case, Chan is not something utterly distinct from the sūtras, much less antagonistic to them. For it embodies the very insights that the sūtras seek to express, allowing for a profound complementarity between the two: What is stated in words in the Buddhist scriptures will be confirmed in fact in the course of Chan practice, while what is experienced in Chan practice will resonate immediately with what is written in the sūtras.

Today one hears many American students say that, as practitioners of Zen or Chan, they don't need to learn or think about the Buddhist sūtras and their teachings. Just sitting in zazen is the real practice; reading and studying written words is for soulless pedants and academics. In China, Korea, and Japan, where knowledge of the Buddhist teachings was widespread, such a rejection of the written word makes poignant sense. But this is a very dangerous attitude in a culture that has no native traditions of Buddhist learning to speak of. For silence, in and of itself, is anything but innocent or neutral, much less free of ignorance. How the more problematic it becomes when it is blissful!

Chan/Zen and the sūtras are both the wisdom of the Buddha, and between the two there is no real discrepancy. Without the Buddha's word how would we ever hear or think to seek the Dharma, much less begin to fulfill our vow to help others on the path to enlightenment? If one has already set out on the path of "Zen" or "Chan," what is this "enlightenment" that you are seeking? What are the aims of "Zen practice"? What does it



entail and how does it “work”? If you did start to ask such questions about Zen, you would probably hear a lot of aphorisms, sayings, and stories from previous masters, all of them gleaned from books. If you started to look into this Chan or Zen literature you would soon discover that it is more extensive than any other school of East Asian Buddhism, even the doctrinal ones! Indeed, to be a good priest or Zen master in Japan, one must be trained in this literature through and through. You would also find that the ancient Chan masters and patriarchs were themselves highly literate individuals, whose teachings were deeply imbued with the language of the Buddhist sūtras. Moreover, of all the specialized ideas that one might come across, by far the most common would be liberative insight or wisdom (chih-hui; prajñā) and its correlate teachings of “emptiness” (k’ung; sunyatā), “having nothing to obtain” (wu so-te; anupalabda) and “having no place to stand or abide” (wu so-chu; apratistha).

Bodhidharma, the twenty-eighth Indian patriarch and first Chinese patriarch of Chan, once remarked, “The Buddhas expound the Dharma of emptiness in order to eradicate the myriad false views. But should you then cling to emptiness, even the Buddhas will be unable to do anything to help you. When there is arising, it is only emptiness that arises; when there is perishing, it is only emptiness that perishes. In reality nothing whatsoever arises or perishes.”¹

The Sixth Chinese patriarch Hui-neng once said, “In this teaching of mine, from ancient times up to the present, all have established no-thought (or no-mind) as



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the main doctrine, non-form as the substance, and non-abiding as the basis. Non-form is to be separated from form even when associated with form. No-thought is not to think even when involved in thought. No-abiding is the original nature of humankind.”² The great Chan master Lin-chi said: “I don’t have a particle of Dharma to give to anyone. All I have is cure for sickness, freedom from bondage. You followers of the Way from here and there, try coming to me without depending on anything.” Or, “I tell you, there’s no Buddha, no Dharma, no practice, no enlightenment. Yet you go off like this on side roads, trying to find something. Blind fools!”³ Thus we find throughout Chan history instances where the scriptural teaching of “emptiness” is equated with the heart

of Chan practice.

If one looks through the Hīnayāna, Mahāyāna, and Vajrayāna scriptures, one will find that they talk endlessly of the need to realize *prajñā* or “insight and wisdom.” In the Hīnayāna teaching, the simple hearing of the Four Noble Truths and the resolve to seek a solution to the miseries of birth and death (*samsāra*) is a kind of *prajñā* “insight.” But in its most profound sense, *prajñā* is nothing short of the living insight—born of meditation—that eliminates the defilements that keep one bound to the cycle of *samsāra*. What that insight discloses is that suffering, in all its forms, is the reified product of false views and “topsy turvy” thinking. By awakening deeply to the fact that existence is problematic rather than pleasant, that existence is fleeting rather than stable, and that, as persons, we are not the discrete and enduring “selves” (*anātman*) that we have always thought we were, a world that was formerly experienced as a tangle of conflict (*dukkha*) is transformed into the easefulness and illumination of *nirvāna*.

In the Mahāyāna sūtras, *prajñā* or “insight” continues to carry the same transformative power, but to an even deeper level. Through the “perfection of insight or wisdom” (*prajñā-pāramitā*)—what the sūtras aptly call the “mother of the Buddhas”—the bodhisattva acquires the wisdom that enables one to deliver others from suffering along with oneself. Upon awakening to the fact that every aspect of mental and physical experience is “empty” of absolute “own-being” (*svabhāva*)—that every individualized moment or object is dependently interconnected with and contingent on

everything else—the bodhisattva sees the unconditioned world of *nirvāna* and conditioned world of *samsāra* as perfectly interfused. So doing, he or she perfects the wisdom, compassion, and skill in means that brings the supreme perfect enlightenment of a Buddha. The Heart Sūtra says, “Relying on this perfection of wisdom, the bodhisattva’s mind is freed of impediment, and by dint of his freedom from impediment he is free of fear and departs far from illusory thinking, thereby realizing the highest *nirvāna*. All Buddhas of the three times acquire supreme perfect enlightenment by relying on this perfection of wisdom (*prajñā-pāramitā*).”

In the Vajrayāna, this insight into “emptiness” (*sunyatā*) wherein *samsāra* and *nirvāna*, wisdom and skill in means, enlightenment and afflictions are experienced as identical is itself the “bliss-void” of the Tantric adept. In the Chan or Zen tradition, too, the insight of *sunyatā* is the foundation of Chan practice. One could say that Chan enlightenment is itself none other than an awakening to *sunyatā*.

1 From Ta-mo lun, in Yanagida Seizan, ed. *Daruma no goroku*. Zen no goroku 1 (Tokyo: Chikuma shoten, 1969), p. 58.

2 Philip B. Yampolsky, *The Platform Sūtra of the Sixth Patriarch* (NY: Columbia University Press, 1967), pp. 137-138.

3 Burton Watson, tr. *The Zen Teachings of Master Lin-chi* (Boston: Shambhala, 1993), p. 53.

