

# Buddha-nature, Critical Buddhism, and Early Chan\*

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## 국문요약

이 논문은 불교와 서양 철학에 대한 최근의 비교 연구에서 왜 중세 중국불교 사상이 더 이목을 끌지 않았는지에 대한 반성으로 시작한다. 일본의 “비판 불교”를 창시한 일본의 마츠모토 시로(松本史朗)와 하카마야 노리아키(袴谷憲

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\* This paper was originally prepared for the conference “*Tathāgatagarbha* or Buddha-nature Thought: Its Formation, Reception, and Transformation in India, East Asia, and Tibet,” held in Seoul, August 6-7, 2016. My thanks to the conference organizers and participants, as well as to the anonymous reviewers of this article, for their helpful feedback. Thanks also to Jay Garfield, Elizabeth Sharf, and Evan Thompson for their comments and suggestions on earlier drafts.

불교학리뷰 (Critical Review for Buddhist Studies)

22권 (2017. 12) 105p~150p

www.kci.go.kr

昭)는 이러한 경시를 당연한 것으로 볼지 모른다. 그들은, 넓게는 동아시아불교 전체, 좁게는 중국 선불교가 여래장과 불성사상을 수용하여 철학적으로 불구가 되었다고 보기 때문이다. 실제로 마츠모토는 남종선의 설계자 중 한 사람인 하택 신희(670-762)를 선종 입장에서 불성 이론을 옹호한 예로 뽑았다.

이 논문은 불성사상과 여래장사상이 실제로 비판적이고 철학적인 작업에 해로운지는 다루지 않는다. 오히려 이 논문의 관심은 8세기 남종선의 창시자들이 가진 불성사상에 대한 깊은 관심은 그것을 수용하는 것과 전혀 무관하였다는 것을 증명하는데 있다. 증거는 다음과 같다. (1) 신희의 저술, 주목할 만한 것은 그가 ‘무정불성’설에 대해 반대했다는 사실, (2) 육조단경, 특히 혜능 ‘오도송’의 다양한 판본들이다. 그리하여 남종선은 비판불교학자들의 반-‘계일원론(dhātuvāda)’에 대한 선구자로 간주할 수 있다.

이 논문은 중국불교 주석가들이 유가행파와 여래장의 형이상학적 일원론과 중관과 반야류 문헌의 반-실체론적 경향을 융합하려는데서 지속적으로 발생하는 문제에 대한 평가로 마무리한다.

주제어: 선, 불성, 여래장, 신희, 육조단경, 비판불교

## Preamble: On Medieval Chinese Buddhism, *Tathāgatagarbha* Doctrine, and Comparative Philosophy

There was a time, not so long ago, when the comparative study of Buddhist and Western philosophy had fallen into disrepute. Buddhologists had come to suspect that the cross-cultural enterprise—drawing connections between Nāgārjuna and Wittgenstein, or Vasubandhu and Kant, or Dōgen and Heidegger, for example—was a fraught if not hopeless task. Too many earnest studies of this type suffered from a lack of familiarity with source languages and texts, as well as from an ignorance of the cultural, institutional, and religious milieux from which the Buddhist materials emerged.<sup>1)</sup> Serious scholars of Buddhism were expected to confine themselves to the rigorous philological study of primary documents set in their original intellectual context. Comparison was regarded as a lost cause.

But comparative work is making a comeback of late, although recent proponents tend to avoid the now unfashionable term “comparative philosophy.” The preferred monikers are “cross-cultural philosophy,” “fusion philosophy,” “confluence philosophy,” “cosmopolitan philosophy,” and the like, all of which are attempts to distinguish the new efforts from those of previous generations. And recent studies do tend to be more philologically informed, historically grounded, and philosophically sophisticated than what came before.<sup>2)</sup> Respected scholars now unabashedly reference modern notions of

1) See, for example, the critique of comparative studies of Madhyamaka in Tuck 1990.

2) See esp. recent publications that draw on contemporary Western phenomenology and

“intentionality,” “self-intimation,” “higher-order thought,” “reductionism,” “eliminativism,” “emergence,” and “panpsychism” in their analyses of Buddhist theories of perception (*pratyakṣa*), cognition (*vijñāna*), non-self (*anātman*), and self-awareness (*svasaṃvedana*, *svasaṃvitti*). This is not to say that the methodological debates have abated; there are divergent views on whether the proper task of scholars is exegetical (i.e., the judicious application of Western philosophical insights to the analysis of classical Asian texts), or philosophical (i.e., bringing venerable Buddhist insights and arguments to bear on issues of current philosophical interest), or something in between. But irrespective of where scholars stand on the hermeneutical issues, everyone seems to concur that (1) correspondences between certain Buddhist and Western accounts of mind, consciousness, and selfhood are more than mere projection and transference; (2) Buddhist philosophers (and indeed Indian philosophers writ large) were dealing, in a sustained and sophisticated fashion, with issues of genuine and ongoing import to contemporary philosophy; and therefore, (3) cross-cultural philosophy, while difficult to do well, is worth pursuing. The recent spate of cross-cultural work is having an impact, and eminent philosophers in the Western analytic tradition, including David Chalmers, Thomas Metzinger, Susanna Siegel, Galen Strawson, and others, can now be found referencing, if not actively engaging with, Indo-Tibetan Buddhist thought.

My use of “Indo-Tibetan” is intentional, as the resurgent interest in comparative philosophy is largely confined to the Indian and Tibetan

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philosophy of mind in their analyses of Madhyamaka and post-Dignāga *pramāṇavāda*-inflected Yogācāra, including Arnold 2005, 2010, 2012; Coseru 2012; Ganeri 2012; Garfield 2015; and Lusthaus 2002.

traditions.<sup>3)</sup> When it comes to Chinese Buddhism the situation is not so rosy. There is, to be sure, continued interest in the comparative study of Chinese ethical and political thought, but the focus is largely restricted to pre-Buddhist Confucian and Daoist materials and to later Song Dynasty (960-1279) Neo-Confucian tracts. With few exceptions, philosophers evince little interest in a comparative engagement with medieval Chinese Buddhist writings.<sup>4)</sup> Given the resurgence of interest in the cross-cultural philosophy of mind, cognition, and consciousness, why are major Chinese Buddhist intellectual traditions such as Chan, Tiantai, and Huayan largely ignored?

There are several possible responses to this question. One theory, popular in the 1960s and 1970s, is that the Chinese were not predisposed to the kind of critical abstraction that marks philosophical discourse in both India and the West. According to this view, the “Chinese mind” is of a decidedly practical bent, evident in the humanistic, this-worldly, and pragmatic orientation of Chinese “Axial Age” thinkers such as Confucius, Mencius, Xunzi, Mozi, and even Laozi and Zhuangzi. The kind of abstract metaphysical and epistemological speculation characteristic of Western philosophy did not hold much appeal in China.<sup>5)</sup>

Some go further, tracing the supposedly utilitarian and anthropomorphic tendencies of the Chinese to the syntactic structure of the ancient Chinese language (the absence of case inflection, for example, or the lack of count

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3) Scholars do consult medieval Chinese translations when the Indic originals are no longer available, but they are rarely interested in the indigenous Chinese commentarial tradition.

4) One notable exception is Brook Ziporyn; see, for example, Ziporyn 2000.

5) Two representative and influential works of this genre are Nakamura 1964, and Moore ed. 1967.

nouns), or to the pictographic origins of the writing system, or to the settled agrarian roots of Chinese social structure (as opposed to the nomadic roots of the Indo-Europeans).<sup>6)</sup> Such “exceptionalist” theories have fallen out of fashion, and for good reason. The “Chinese mind” is a problematic construct to say the least, Chinese culture is far from unitary or homogenous, and arguments predicated on linguistic or orthographic determinism have proven flawed or unconvincing.

Another explanation is that the Chinese Buddhist tradition, influenced by Laozi and Zhuangzi, flirted with paradox, and this compromised their analytic rigor and conceptual clarity. In Western philosophy, if you run up against contradiction, the assumption is that you made a wrong turn somewhere and you must back up and determine where you went astray. To tolerate paradox is to condone incoherence, since once a contradiction is admitted, any assertion (as well as its negation) can be proven true (*ex contradictione quodlibet*; in philosophical logic this is known as “explosion”). The Indian and Tibetan philosophical traditions eschewed paradox for much the same reason, although some have cited Nāgārjuna as a possible exception.<sup>7)</sup>

Laozi and Zhuangzi do not seem to have been troubled by paradox. Indeed Zhuangzi, drawing on sophists such as Gongsun Long 公孫龍 and

6) Hansen (1983) is perhaps the most sophisticated attempt to link the syntax of Classical Chinese to the nature of Chinese philosophy, but see the extended critique in Harbsmeier 1998.

7) This is now a matter of dispute; Deguchi Yasuo, Jay Garfield and Graham Priest have argued that some Indian thinkers, notably Nāgārjuna, did endorse paradox (Garfield and Priest 2003; Deguchi, Garfield and Priest 2008). Tom Tillemans (2009, 2013a) disagrees, but see the rejoinder by Deguchi, Garfield and Priest (2013).

Hui Shi 惠施, not only countenanced paradox but reveled in it, and the same is arguably true of Six Dynasties Occult Learning (Xuanxue 玄學) commentators such as Wang Bi 王弼 (226-249) and Guo Xiang 郭象 (d. 312). Occult Learning would in turn influence the early Chinese appropriation and exposition of Indian Buddhist thought, evident in the writings of essayists such as Sengzhao 僧肇 (374-414).<sup>8)</sup> The later Chan, Huayan, and Tiantai traditions inherited this taste for paradoxical formulations and tended to work with, rather than around, contradiction. This culminates in the overtly dialethic *gong'an* 公案 literature of the Song Dynasty.<sup>9)</sup>

This penchant for paradox among Chinese Buddhist authors has been seen by some as further evidence of the pragmatic and anthropocentric orientation of the Chinese. According to this theory, the Chinese did not approach philosophical discourse as an end in itself but rather as a means to elicit a mystical experience that lies beyond the domain of reason. The point of paradox is to demarcate, and ultimately transcend, the limits of conceptual thought, placing philosophy in service of a soteriological goal. This perennialist approach to paradox and religious experience is no longer taken seriously by specialists, although it still makes its way into popular writings on Chinese thought and religion. This is not to say that some Chinese Buddhist exegetes did not openly endorse paradox; it is just that there are perfectly good *philosophical* grounds for their dialethic tendencies

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8) This is evident simply from the titles of Sengzhao's essays: "Understanding is Without Knowing" (*Bore wuzhi lun* 般若無知論), "Things Don't Move" (*Wu buqian lun* 物不遷論), "Nirvana has no Name" (*Niepan wuming lun* 涅槃無名論).

9) On the place of paradox in the Tiantai tradition see especially Ziporyn 2000 and 2013; on Chan see Sharf 2007 and forthcoming.

(Deguchi et al. forthcoming), and thus there is no reason to dismiss it as a literary gambit in service of a non-conceptual spiritual experience.

The explanations put forward above to account for the purported shortcomings of Chinese Buddhist philosophy can be dismissed as facile or misguided. There is yet one more thesis to consider, namely, that the culprits are the doctrines of *tathāgatagarbha* and buddha-nature. This claim is most closely associated with the writings of Matsumoto Shirō 松本史朗 and Hakamaya Noriaki 袴谷憲昭 of Komazawa University, who dubbed their position “Critical Buddhism” (*hihan bukkkyō* 批判仏教).<sup>10</sup> Matsumoto and Hakamaya blame *tathāgatagarbha* (*nyoraizō* 如來藏), buddha-nature (*bussō* 佛性), and original-awakening (*hongaku* 本覺) thought for all manner of conceptual and social ills, from the philosophical lassitude of East Asian Buddhism to dire ethical transgressions—social discrimination, persecution, militarism—sanctioned by Buddhist institutions.<sup>11</sup> Moreover, they insist that this lamentable doctrine, which they dub *dhātuvāda* (“substantialism,” sometimes rendered “locus theory” or “topicalism”) and “generative monism” (*hasseironteki ichigenron* 發生論的一元論), is simply not Buddhism at all. Real Buddhism is *critical* Buddhism, epitomized by the early teachings of non-self (*anātman*), karma and dependent arising (*pratītyasamutpāda*), and by the later Madhyamaka doctrine of emptiness (*śūnyavāda*).

Scholars in the West have remained largely unmoved by the polemics of the Critical Buddhists. That Matsumoto and Hakamaya champion Dōgen

10) On Critical Buddhism see esp. Matsumoto 1989, 1993; and Hakamaya 1989, 1990; see also the English accounts in Hubbard and Swanson, eds. 1997; and Shields 2011.

11) For reasons that will become clear below, in this essay I will use the terms *tathāgatagarbha*, “buddha-nature,” and “original-awakening” more or less interchangeably.



Kigen 道元希玄 (1200-1253), founder of Japanese Sōtō Zen, as one of the few East Asian Critical Buddhists leads some to suspect that their scholarly rigor and objectivity have been compromised by their normative social and sectarian agendas.<sup>12)</sup> Moreover, their claim that *tathāgatagarbha* thought, and by extension almost all of East Asian Mahāyāna, is “not Buddhism” seems historically and hermeneutically naïve.

I do not intend to defend the somewhat fundamentalist arguments of the Critical Buddhists. Precursors of *tathāgatagarbha* thought can be found in Buddhism from early on, and even were that not the case, it seems presumptuous for modern scholars to censure a staple of mainstream Indian Mahāyāna.<sup>13)</sup> Nonetheless, Buddhist philosophical disputation in China developed along a different trajectory than it did in India and Tibet, and *tathāgatagarbha* doctrine may well have contributed to its “Sinitic” character. In India, Buddhist philosophers honed their positions in argument and debate, giving rise to a host of divergent but equally sophisticated systems: Vaibhāṣika, Sautrāntika, Pudgalavāda, Madhyamaka, Yogācāra, and so on. Each school played the role—real or imagined—of *pūrvapakṣa* (rhetorical opponent) in the exegetical writings of their rivals, and their collective endeavors resulted in a culture of discourse every bit as complex, recondite, and self-critical as we find in departments of philosophy today. The Chinese

12) Komazawa University, the institutional home of Matsumoto and Hakamaya, is affiliated with Sōtō Zen. Matsumoto and Hakamaya believe that Dōgen did not come to reject *dhātuvāda* until his later writings, particularly the twelve-fascicle *Shōbōgenzō* 正法眼藏. On the debates over the Critical Buddhists’ reading of Dōgen, see the overview in Heine 1997.

13) On the antecedents and early development of *tathāgatagarbha* thought, see esp. Takasaki 1966, 1974; Ruegg 1969, 1989; Shimoda 1997; Zimmerman 2002; and Radich 2015.

Buddhist monastic institution rivaled if not exceeded their Indian and Tibetan counterparts in terms of sheer size, wealth, and textual learning, and it too gave rise to a monumental exegetical literature. But arguably, the Chinese scholastic tradition did not evince the same level of interest in critical argumentation and debate; they preferred to grapple with doctrinal controversies—with ambiguities, inconsistencies, and contradictions in the canonical record, for example—through scriptural hermeneutics based on pseudo-historical classification schemes (*panjiao* 判教), or through claims of authority based on lineal transmission, approaches that tend to sideline philosophical critique. Is it possible that the unbridled triumph of *tathāgatagarbha* doctrine in East Asia—a doctrine intended to be taken on faith (*śraddhā*) rather than on reason—discouraged philosophical analysis and disputation?

That *tathāgatagarbha* doctrine can only be approached through faith is, in fact, a central tenet in early *tathāgatagarbha* texts, including the *Nirvāṇa-sūtra* (which repeatedly defines the despised *icchantikas* as those without faith),<sup>14</sup> *Tathāgatagarbha-sūtra*,<sup>15</sup> *Ratnagotravibhāga*,<sup>16</sup> *Śrīmālādevīsīmanāda-sūtra*, and so on.<sup>17</sup> The *Nirvāṇa-sūtra*, for example, is unambiguous: “Good man, this buddha-nature that you possess is thus profound and difficult to discern. Only buddhas can understand it; it is not understood by *śrāvakas*

14) *Da banniepan jing* 大般涅槃經, T.376 (trans. \*Buddhabhadra [Fotuobatuoluo 佛陀跋陀羅] and Faxian 法顯), T.374 (trans. \*Dharmakṣema 曇無讖), and T.375 (a revised translation by Huiyan 慧嚴 et al.).

15) *Dafangdeng rulaizang jing* 大方等如來藏經, T.666 and T.667.

16) *Ratnagotravibhāga-mahāyānōttaratantra-śāstra* (*Foxing fenbie dasheng yanjiu yaoyi lun* 佛性分別大乘究竟要義論), T.1611.

17) *Śrīmālādevīsīmanāda-sūtra* (*Shengman shizi hu yisheng da fangbian fanguang jing* 勝鬘師子吼一乘大方便廣經, T.353); see the discussion in King 1995, 4-5.

and *pratyekabuddhas*. 善男子。所有佛性如是甚深難得知見。唯佛能知。非諸聲聞緣覺所及。”<sup>18)</sup> The *Ratnagotravibhāga* is similarly explicit: “Only the Absolute Essence is the resort for the contemplation of the mind, only the Absolute Essence is the argument for the proper understanding of the mind. This Essence itself is not accessible to imagination nor to discrimination. It is accessible only to faith.”<sup>19)</sup> In other words, faith is not merely one option; it is the *only* option. It is difficult to know what philosophical sense can be made of a doctrine that canonical sources insist cannot be understood conceptually.<sup>20)</sup>

That *tathāgatagarbha* is a matter of faith rather than reason may explain, in part, the proliferation of terms under which the doctrine is known, including *buddhagarbha*, *buddhagotra*, *buddhadhātu*, *paramārthadhātu*, *dharmadhātu*, *dharmakāya*, and so on. The profusion of overlapping designations may be seen as a literary device intended to offset the poverty of conceptual specification. This does not mean that these terms were not pressed into philosophical service. While the *tathāgatagarbha* doctrine never spawned an independent exegetical tradition in South Asia, Madhyamaka and Yogācāra commentators in India and Tibet availed themselves of the *tathāgatagarbha* idea, particularly when they found themselves boxed into a corner. It was used to explain, for example, how liberation is possible—how buddhahood, which is by definition unconditioned (*asaṃskṛta*, *wuwei* 無為) and thus

18) T.374: 12.412b4-6; trans. Blum 2013, 251, with changes.

19) Trans., from the Sanskrit, Takasaki 1966, 295-296; cf. T.1611: 31.839b13-15.

20) The philosophical problems in dealing with *tathāgatagarbha* and buddha-nature are structurally analogous to those involved in the conceptual analysis of non-conceptual cognition (*nirvikalpa-jñāna*); see Sharf 2016 and 2018.

unknowable and unattainable (*anupalabdhi*, *bukede* 不可得), can nevertheless be known and attained. But when Mahāyāna exegetes aver to *tathāgatagarbha* and buddha-nature doctrine in this fashion, they typically do so by associating it with concepts already well established in their systems—concepts such as storehouse consciousness (*ālayavijñāna*), luminous mind (*prabhāsvaracitta*), and self-awareness (*svasaṃvedana*). Somewhat like the Biblical notion of an all-powerful but unknowable creator deity, the *tathāgatagarbha*/buddha-nature nomenclature functions as a placeholder by design—its referent is said to be beyond all signification—and thus it acquires conceptual specificity and substance only through its rhetorical deployments.<sup>21)</sup>

The Biblical notion of God may be a good analogy for the polemical logic of *tathāgatagarbha*. The notion of an eternally abiding, transcendent and yet immanent *tathāgatagarbha* or buddha-nature is proffered as an ineffable *something* that lies beyond rational thought but that nevertheless explains how liberation is possible. It is precisely the indeterminacy of the *tathāgatagarbha* idea that made it strategically useful to Mahāyāna philosophers, including some with anti-reificationist leanings, much as the indeterminacy of “God” allowed eminently critical thinkers such as Descartes, Berkeley and Kant—paragons of enlightenment rationality—to employ the concept when needed to get themselves out of difficulty.

While the notion of *tathāgatagarbha* was adopted strategically in India by Madhyamaka and Yogācāra exegetes, with few exceptions (notably the Faxiang 法相 tradition associated with Xuanzang 玄奘 and his heirs) Chinese

21) For an astute analysis of the original indeterminacy of the Biblical concept of God see esp. Halbertal and Margalit 1992.

exegetes of all stripes viewed the doctrine as the sine qua non of their tradition, the moon to which all scholastic thought and religious practice points. This raises the question as to its impact on philosophical pursuits in China—whether it contributed, for example, to a general disinterest in Buddhist logic and dialectics.

The point of this brief essay is not, however, to bemoan the philosophical infirmity of *tathāgatagarbha* doctrine or its deleterious effects on Chinese Buddhism. (After all, my failure to appreciate the conceptual precision and elegance of *tathāgatagarbha* thought may simply bespeak my own prejudices and ignorance.) Rather, my interest lies in the possibility that certain early Chan teachers were themselves uncomfortable with the *tathāgatagarbha* doctrine, whether because of its unorthodoxy, or its lack of coherence, or because of its adverse ethical entailments. Evidence, I admit, is scanty; our primary documents are Dunhuang manuscripts, often fragmentary, recording, typically second or third hand, teachings by Chan masters who did not necessarily place a premium on philosophical precision and conceptual clarity. Nevertheless, the architects of Southern Chan—Huineng 慧能 (638-713) and Heze Shenhui 荷澤神會 (670-762)—had an ax to grind with their Northern Chan rivals, and there is evidence that one target of their critique was the Northern Chan understanding of *tathāgatagarbha*. This “critical” strand of medieval Chan is not as well studied or understood as is the dominant buddha-nature approach, yet it is here, I suspect, that we find the seeds of a sophisticated and properly *philosophical* Chan contribution to the evolution of Mahāyāna thought writ large.<sup>22)</sup>

## Shenhui and the Buddha-nature of the Insentient

In his article “The Meaning of ‘Zen,’” Matsumoto (1997) claims that the common goal of the Chinese Chan tradition is the cessation of conceptual thought. Matsumoto finds antecedents of this idea in the teachings of Āḷāra Kālāma and Uddaka Rāmaputta, the Buddha’s first teachers who mastered highly rarified states of consciousness—the *samāpattis*—that are said to be non-conceptual. For Matsumoto, the attempt to curtail all thinking in the interest of realizing one’s abiding buddha-nature renders Chan the epitome of *dhātvavāda*, and as examples he cites two influential eighth-century masters, namely, Moheyan 摩訶衍 (8th c.), who is usually associated with Northern Chan, and the Southern Chan polemicist Shenhui.

Moheyan is well known as the Chinese representative in the so-called Samye debates supposedly convened by the Tibetan king Trisong Detsen (ca. 742-800) in the 790s. According to tradition, Moheyan faced off against the Indian master Kamalaśīla (fl. 740-795) who, at least according to later Tibetan sources, decisively vanquished Moheyan. In the fragmentary but possibly less biased Chinese accounts of the encounter, Moheyan repeatedly and unabashedly claims that awakening can be had immediately, and that all one need do is to stop thinking and conceptualizing. Prior practice, rigorous monastic training, and scriptural study are all unnecessary (Demiéville 1952; Gómez 1983; Sharf 2014a, 169-170; Tillemans 2013b).

The Northern Chan notion that awakening can be attained rapidly through

22) In this short article I do not have the space to pursue the philosophical contributions of Chan per se; my focus, rather, is on preparing the historical foundation for such a project. For a more philosophically oriented approach, see Sharf forthcoming.

meditative practices directed at the cessation of thought is predicated on the buddha-nature teachings found in texts such as the *Awakening of Faith in the Mahāyāna* (*Dasheng qixin lun* 大乘起信論). Much has been written on this topic, but in brief, the *Awakening of Faith* treats terms like *tathāgatagarbha* (*rulai zang* 如來藏), “dharma body” (*dharmakāya*, *fashen* 法身), “thusness” (*tathatā*, *zhenru* 真如), “buddha-nature” (*foxing* 佛性), “original awakening” (*benjue* 本覺), and even “store consciousness” (*ālayavijñāna*, *alaiye shi* 阿賴耶識) as more or less synonymous, linking them to “non-discriminating mind” (*wufenbie xin* 無分別心) and “inherently pure mind” (*zixing qingjing xin* 自性清淨心). That we fail to recognize our buddha-nature is due to our discriminating mind (*fenbie xin* 分別心), which is captivated by the endless array of objects that appear before us. If we can just quiet the inner chatter and turn back toward the source (*yuan* 源), we realize the “illumination of great wisdom” (*dazhihui guangming* 大智慧光明), the “universally radiant dharma realm” (*bianzhao fajie* 遍照法界), the “apprehension of reality as it is” (*rushi liaozhi* 如實了知), and so on, all of which are euphemisms, culled from various scriptures, for buddhahood.

Kamalaśīla had a rather different understanding of Mahāyāna, one not predicated on an abiding metaphysical ground or substrate that undergirds the momentary arising and passing away of cognition. For Kamalaśīla, the cessation of cognitive construction results not in the experience of a reality lying behind or within the momentary flow of appearances, but rather in the cessation of consciousness itself. Thus a practitioner who succeeds in stopping discursive thought simply renders him or herself insentient. Accordingly, Kamalaśīla challenges Moheyan to explain the difference between a realized

Chan adept and the “gods without conception” (*asamjñika-sattvāḥ*, *asāmjñika-deva*)—a class of mindless zombies who populate one of the rarified heavens in the fourth-*dhyāna* realm (*caturtha-dhyāna-bhūmi*).

This is a serious indictment. Those who are reborn as gods without conception were, in their previous lives, yogis who practiced heterodox forms of meditation—presumably practices associated with the non-Buddhist monistic teachings of the *Upaniṣads* and *Yogasūtras*. Such techniques are aimed at the cessation of mundane consciousness so as to realize one’s identity with the godhead—*Īśvara* or Brahman—which is pure consciousness itself. According to the early Buddhists, however, rather than realizing oneness with the godhead, these benighted yogis end up trapped in a vegetative state in the Heaven of the Gods Without Conception where they remain for eons (Sharf 2014a, 150-157). Much like the Critical Buddhists, Kamalaśīla is accusing Moheyan of propagating a heretical and pernicious doctrine under the banner of Buddhism.

For his part, Moheyan is unapologetic. He insists that the mistake made by the gods without conception is not their practice per se, but rather their conceptual *attachment* to non-conceptuality. They just need to free themselves from thinking. He explains:

Those gods [without conception] posit the existence of both meditative discernments and paths of rebirth, and they grasp at the absorption of non-conception. It is precisely because of such deluded conceptualization that they are born into that heaven. If they could free themselves from [attachment to] meditative absorption into non-conception, then there would be no deluded thought or



rebirth into that heaven. The *Vajracchedikā-sūtra* says, “To be free of all marks, this is called [the way of] the Buddhas.” In what scripture is it written that freedom from deluded conception is not the way to buddhahood?<sup>23)</sup>

The “debate” between Kamalaśīla and Moheyan in Tibet mirrors a controversy that took place at roughly the same time in China, in which leading Chan masters argued the virtues of “mindlessness” (*wuxin* 無心) and the doctrine of the “buddha-nature of the insentient” (*wuqing foxing* 無情佛性). As I have written on these topics at length elsewhere (Sharf 2014a, 2014b), my comments here will be brief and to the point.

The Chan teachers associated with the East Mountain or Northern lineages taught a range of techniques under the rubrics of “maintaining mind” (*shouxin* 守心), “maintaining unity” (*shouyi* 守一), “pacifying mind” (*anxin* 安心), “discerning mind” (*guanxin* 觀心), “viewing mind” (*kanxin* 看心), “collecting mind” (*shexin* 攝心), and so forth. Whatever their differences, the purveyors of these methods, like Moheyan, held that realization of one’s inner buddha is effected through stilling thought, and they found scriptural warrant for their position in popular Yogācāra texts such as the *Awakening of Faith* and the *Lankāvatāra-sūtra*. These texts teach the non-duality of grasper and grasped, of mind and world, of animate subject and inanimate object. Some Chan exegetes would then argue that as inanimate objects such as walls,

23) *Dunwu dasheng zhenglijue* 頓悟大乘正理決, Pelliot 4646, folio 131 r-v (quoting from *Vajracchedikā*, T.236: 8.754b24-25):

彼諸天人有觀有趣無想定。因此妄想而生彼天。若能離無想定。則無妄想不生彼天。金剛經云。離一切諸相則名諸佛。若言離妄想不成佛者出何經文。

Cf. Demiéville 1952, 62; and the discussion in Sharf 2014a, 169.

roof-tiles, and stones are intrinsically free of dualistic thinking and delusion, they both possess and express this abiding buddha-nature. As such, the goal of practice is a state of “mindlessness,” which should not be imagined as akin to being comatose or dead—after all, the distinction between life and death, like that between *nirvāṇa* and *saṃsāra*, is ultimately empty. Rather, to be mindless is to awaken to one’s intrinsic unity with all things, and to recognize that the insentient “mindless” things around us are already realized buddhas.

One of the earliest references to this doctrine in a Chan work is found in the *Record of the Masters and Disciples of the Laṅkāvatāra*, in which both the fourth patriarch Daoxin 道信 (580-651) and the fifth patriarch Hongren 弘忍 (602-675?) are depicted as defending the claim that insentient objects not only possess buddha-nature but also preach the dharma.<sup>24)</sup> Hongren, for example, says,

At the moment when you are in the temple sitting in meditation, is your body not also sitting in meditation beneath the trees of the mountain forests? Are earth, trees, tiles, and stones also not able to sit in meditation? Are earth, trees, tiles, and stones not also able to see forms and hear sounds, wear a robe and carry a bowl? When the *Laṅkāvatāra-sūtra* speaks of the dharma-body of the object sphere, it [refers to] precisely this.<sup>25)</sup>

24) *Lengqie shizi ji* 楞伽師資記, attributed to Jingjue 淨覺 (683-ca. 750). On the dating and authorship of this text see esp. Barrett 1991, who believes the text could not have been written later than 716; and Faure 1997, 160-176.

25) T.2837: 85.1290a14-18; Yanagida 1971, 287-288:

汝正在寺中坐禪時、山林樹下亦有汝身坐禪不。一切土木瓦石亦能坐禪不。土木瓦石亦能見色

As far as we can tell, the doctrine that insentient objects have buddha-nature was accepted by almost all Northern Chan masters, as well as by teachers in the Ox-Head and Tiantai lineages. (Zhanran 湛然 [711-782], the sixth Tiantai patriarch, devoted an entire treatise to the topic, the *Jingangpi* 金剛鐮 or “Adamantine Scalpel.”) Indeed, by the Song Dynasty this position was largely uncontested, and it was treated as orthodoxy among the Kamakura schools in Japan as well. It is significant, therefore, that the founders of Southern Chan, Huineng and Shenhui, are among the few on record to denounce it. The target of their criticism is not the existence of buddha-nature per se, which they clearly endorse, but rather the depiction of buddha-nature as an abiding metaphysical ground that permeates all things (*bian yiqie chu* 遍一切處).

The surviving corpus is fragmentary and redacted at the hands of later editors, so it is not always easy to get a clear sense of Shenhui’s teachings, but his opposition to the buddha-nature of the insentient doctrine is unambiguous. See, for example, the following exchange with an Ox-Head Mountain master taken from his so-called *Recorded Sayings* (*Shenhui yulu* 神會語錄):

Chan Master Yuan of Ox-Head Mountain asked: “Does buddha-nature permeate everywhere or not?”

[Shenhui] answered: “Buddha-nature permeates all sentient things, but does not permeate all insentient things.”

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聞聲著衣持鉢不。楞伽經云境界法身是也。

The citation can be found in the first fascicle of Gunabhadra’s 求那跋陀羅 (394-468) translation of the *Lankāvatāra-sūtra* (*Lengqie abaduoluo baojing* 楞伽阿跋多羅寶經), T.670: 16.484a10.

[Master Yuan] asked: “Venerable elders are all known to say:

Lush groves of emerald bamboos,  
 Are wholly the dharma-body.  
 Luxuriant clusters of chrysanthemums,  
 Nothing is not *prajñā* (wisdom).<sup>26)</sup>

Now why do you say that buddha-nature only permeates sentient things and does not permeate insentient things?”

[Shenhui] answered: “Surely you do not mean that the groves of emerald bamboos are the same as the meritorious dharma-body, or that clusters of chrysanthemums are equal to the wisdom of *prajñā*. If the groves of bamboos and chrysanthemums are equal to the dharma-body and to *prajñā*, then in which scripture does the Tathāgata predict that an emerald bamboo or a chrysanthemum will attain *bodhi*? It thus follows that the notion that emerald bamboos and chrysanthemums are the same as the dharma-body and *prajñā* is a heterodox doctrine. Why so? Because when the *Nirvāṇa-sūtra* makes reference to that which lacks buddha-nature, it is referring precisely to insentient things.”<sup>27)</sup>

26) I have not been able to identify the source of this verse, although it appears repeatedly in discussions of the buddha-nature of the insentient doctrine; see, for example, the *Zutang ji* 祖堂集 records for Nanyang Huizhong 南陽慧忠 (Yanagida 1984, 1.125.13), Dongshan Liangjie 洞山良价 (ibid., 2.65.3), and Dazhu Huihai 大珠慧海 (ibid., 4.47.6).

27) Yang 1996, 86-87:

牛頭山袁禪師問：佛性遍一切處否？答曰：佛性遍一切有情、不遍一切無情。問曰：先輩大德皆言道、青青翠竹、盡是法身、鬱鬱黃花、無非般若。今禪師何故言道、佛性獨遍一切有情、不遍一切無情？答曰：豈將青青翠竹同于功德法身？豈將鬱鬱黃花、等般若之智？若青青竹黃花同於法身般若者、如來於何經中、說與青竹黃花授菩提記？若是將青竹黃花同於法身般若者、此即外道說也、何以故？涅槃經、具有明文、無佛性者、所謂無情物是也。

Cf. Hu 1968, 139. For a brief summary of the relationships among the various manuscripts and manuscript fragments of Shenhui’s writings found at Dunhuang, see Yampolsky 1967,

Here Shenhui rejects the buddha-nature of the insentient out of hand as preposterous and contrary to scripture, but his objections are based on principle as much as on textual authority. For one thing, he castigates Northern Chan teachers of his day for their lack of emphasis on morality (*śīla*), and he may have felt that the antinomian entailments of the buddha-nature of the insentient doctrine undermined the need to adhere to the precepts. In a passage likely directed at Northern Chan masters, he says, “Learned friends, should one claim to have attained the practice of unexcelled awakening without purifying the three actions and without maintaining the rules of abstinence—[know that] there is no such a thing! 知識、學無上菩提、不淨三業、不持齋戒、言其得者、無有是處” (Tōdai goroku kenkyūhan ed. 2006, 29). It was not merely the Northern Chan tendency to devalue the precepts that got on his nerves; he was particularly incensed at their tendency to disparage the Buddha’s teachings as an inessential means toward an end. He says, “When I talk of ‘discarding,’ I only mean to discard the false mind, not to discard the dharma. 所言除者、但除妄心、不除其法” (ibid, 53-54). The target of these comments would appear to be the Northern Chan emphasis on the absolute at the expense of the conventional, and the ensuing devaluation of both right action and right thought. It may be no coincidence that this too is a central concern of Matsumoto and Hakamaya, who hold that buddha-nature ideology undermines a commitment to ethics, social justice, and critical thinking.

Shenhui is similarly concerned with the Northern Chan fetishization of

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24-26 n. 67. See also the studies/translations of Shenhui’s writings in Gernet 1977; Hu 1968; McRae 1987; Tōdai goroku kenkyūhan 唐代語錄研究班 ed. 2006; Yang 1996.

seated meditation, and the wrongheaded conviction that bringing an end to conceptual thought will, in and of itself, yield wisdom. Rather than propounding a state of non-conceptual *samādhi*, Shenhui, drawing on *Prajñāpāramitā* teachings, emphasizes “discerning insight” (*prajñā*). The following quotations from Shenhui’s *Platform Sermon (Tanyu 壇語)*<sup>28)</sup> all address his understanding of authentic Chan, in contradistinction to the errant teachings of his rivals.

You should not lower the eyes in front of you, as you will end up abiding in [vapid] gazing which is useless. You should not have the intention to focus the mind, and also not look far away or close—these are all useless. The scripture says: “Not contemplating is *bodhi*,” because it is free of recollection.<sup>29)</sup> This is the naturally empty and quiescent mind...<sup>30)</sup>

Non-abiding is quiescence, and the essence of quiescence is what is called meditation. From this essence comes spontaneous knowledge, and the awareness of the essence of fundamental quiescence is called wisdom. This is the equivalence of meditation and wisdom...<sup>31)</sup>

When the scripture says: “From quiescence arises clarity,” this is what it means.

28) The full title is *Nanyang heshang dunjiao jietuo chanmen zhiliaoxing tanyu* 南陽和上頓教解脫禪門直了性壇語, “Venerable Nanyang’s Altar Sermon on the Direct Realization of One’s Nature According to Chan Doctrine of Liberation through the Sudden Teaching,” Pelliot 2045; I use the edition in *Tōdai goroku kenkyūhan* 2006.

29) From the *Vimalakīrti-sūtra*, T.475: 14.542b24.

30) *Tōdai goroku kenkyūhan* 2006, 70:

不得垂眼向下、便墮眼住、不中用。不得作意攝心、亦不復遠看近看、皆不中用。經云：不觀是菩提、無憶念故、即是自性空寂心。

31) *Ibid.*, 73: 無住是寂靜、寂靜體即名為定。從體上有自然智、能知本寂靜體、名為慧。此是定慧等。

The non-abiding mind is not apart from knowing, and knowing is not apart from non-abiding. Know that mind is non-abiding; there is nothing else to know.<sup>32)</sup>

In other words, just sitting still in an effort to quiet the mind and realize one's true nature is not real quiescence or real wisdom. Practice requires, or better yet *is*, “knowing” (*zhi* 知, *prajñā*), which is to know that even mind is non-abiding (*wuzhu* 無住). This notion of non-abiding—a signature teaching of the *Vajracchedikā-sūtra*—seems to be Shenhui's antidote to the reified understanding of “pure mind” that, he believes, inevitably becomes an object of clinging.

Friends, listen carefully, as I will explain deluded mind. What is deluded mind? Should you all have come here today while yet craving for wealth, sensory experiences, men, women, etc., or thinking of luxurious gardens and mansions, this is gross delusion, and of course you must rid yourselves of this mind. What you don't know about is subtle delusion. What is subtle delusion? When the mind hears the teaching of *bodhi*, it is giving rise to a mind that grasps at *bodhi*. When hearing the teaching of *nirvāṇa*, it is giving rise to a mind that grasps at *nirvāṇa*. When hearing the teaching of emptiness, it is giving rise to a mind that grasps at emptiness. When hearing the teaching of purity, it is giving rise to a mind that grasps at purity. When hearing the teaching of meditation, it is giving rise to a mind that grasps at meditation. These are all deluded mind, and are the fetters of the dharma. These are to have a view of the dharma. The mind that functions in such a fashion will not attain liberation, as it is not your

32) Ibid., 73: 經云：寂上起照。此義如是。無住心不離知、知不離無住。知心無住、更無余知。

fundamentally and intrinsically quiescent mind. To attempt to abide in *nirvāṇa* is to be bound by *nirvāṇa*, to abide in emptiness is to be bound by emptiness. To abide in *dhyāna* is to be bound by *dhyāna*. For the mind to function in such a fashion is to obstruct the way of *bodhi*.<sup>33)</sup>

Thus in Shenhui's view the Northern teachers were propounding a *samādhi* devoid of wisdom, and his alternative is to stress that understanding must *precede* technique. Or more accurately, proper understanding or wisdom *is* proper technique.

Shenhui has no qualms about accusing many of the so-called masters of his day of lacking both the wisdom and the credentials to teach Chan. Commenting on the deleterious effects of Shenxiu 神秀 (606?-706) and his followers in his "Treatise on Determining Truth and Falsity with Regard to the Southern Tradition of Bodhidharma" (*Putidamo nanzong ding shifei lun* 菩提達摩南宗定是非論), he says:

There must be more than twenty people [i.e., direct disciples of Shenxiu] who preach Chan and teach people, none of whom have received the transmission or permission to preach in such a manner. Descending from these twenty or more people, there are now more than several hundred people preaching Chan and

33) Ibid., 56:

知者、諦聽、為說妄心。何者妄心？仁者等今既來此間、貪愛財色、男女等、及念園林、屋宅、此是粗妄、應無此心。為有細妄、仁者不知、何者是細妄？心聞說菩提、起心取菩提；聞說涅槃、起心取涅槃；聞說空、起心取空；聞說淨、起心取淨；聞說定、起心取定、此皆是妄心、亦是法縛、亦是法見。若作此用心、不得解脫、非本自寂靜心。作住涅槃、被涅槃縛；住空、被空縛；住定、被定縛。作此用心、皆是障菩提道。



teaching people, yet they lack any sense of hierarchy, lack any sense of the master-disciple relationship, and all struggle for name and profit while they lack official sanction. They sow confusion within the true dharma, and confuse students of the way. These are the signs of the disappearance of the buddha-dharma. Chan Master Huineng is the one who received the person-to-person transmission. There are now several tens of thousands of monastic and lay disciples who studied under him, yet not a single one of them would be so brazen as to establish himself as a Chan teacher. Up until now I have not heard a single one *claim* to have received transmission.<sup>34)</sup>

(Having lived through the rapid growth of Zen Buddhism in America over the last half century, I can sympathize with Shenhui's concerns about the rampant proliferation of self-appointed "masters," many of whom draw large if undiscerning audiences, and the attendant vulgarization of the Buddhist teachings.)

It is not always easy to deduce the precise contours of Shenhui's alternative, but his overriding concern appears to be that buddha-nature not be construed in substantive terms—as an abiding ground or topos (*dhātu*) that could be construed as the goal of meditative praxis. Instead, drawing on the *Vajracchedikā-sūtra*, he emphasizes non-abiding—the insight that

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34) I am using the edition in Yang 1996, 28:

將有二十餘人說禪教人、並無傳授付囑、得說只沒說；從二十餘人已下、近有數百餘人說禪教人、並無大小、無師資情、共爭名利、元無稟承。亂於正法、惑諸學道者。此滅佛法相也。能禪師是的相傳付囑人、已下門徒道俗近有數萬餘人、無有一人敢濫開禪門。縱有一人得付囑者、至今未說。

Cf. Hu 1968, 282-283.

there is ultimately no ground, no place in which to take rest.

In his discussion of Dōgen’s position on buddha-nature, Matsumoto introduces a distinction between what he calls “innate buddha-nature theory” (*bussshō naizai ron* 仏性內在論) and “immanent buddha-nature theory” (*bussshō kenzaī ron* 仏性顯在論). The former holds that all sentient beings are in possession of buddha-nature or ultimate reality and thus have the capacity to attain awakening. This developed in contrast to the Yogācāra *gotra* or five-nature theory (*wuxing gebie* 五性各別), which holds that there is a class of beings—the *icchantika* (*yichanti* 一闍提)—that forever lacks the capacity to achieve liberation. In contrast, the latter “immanent” position is one of metaphysical monism—it holds that the entire phenomenal world is an expression of buddha-nature or truth itself (Matsumoto 2000; Heine 1997, 139). Matsumoto claims that Dōgen sanctioned the immanent buddha-nature doctrine in his earlier writings, specifically the seventy-five-fascicle *Shōbōgenzō* 正法眼藏, which contains an entire chapter on the preaching of the dharma by insentient things (*Mujō seppō* 無情說法). As he matured, however, Dōgen came to see the error of his ways, and his later twelve-fascicle *Shōbōgenzō*, which foregrounds the teaching of karma and causality, rejects immanent buddha-nature in favor of innate buddha-nature.

This distinction made by Matsumoto is not, as far as I am aware, clearly articulated in Chinese Buddhist texts, and it is not necessarily explicit in Dōgen’s writings either. But Matsumoto’s distinction between innate and immanent is nevertheless a useful hermeneutic tool, as it may well capture a difference between Shenhui’s position on buddha-nature and that of his rivals. Shenhui has no objection to the doctrine of innate buddha-nature—

indeed, his subitist teachings are predicated on this abiding capacity—but he is an uncompromising opponent of the immanent buddha-nature position. And this is why I believe Matsumoto is wrong to lump Shenhui together with the Chan *dhātuvādins*. Indeed, Shenhui might more accurately be seen as the original Critical Buddhist!

## The Dueling Verses of the *Platform Scripture*

Shenhui's position on *tathāgatagarbha* and buddha-nature is difficult to pin down, and in depicting him as an “innatist” I might be accused of cherry picking from his somewhat disorganized corpus. But there is no question that he objected to the doctrine that insentient things have buddha-nature, and this contrarian position finds its way into the *Platform Scripture of the Sixth Patriarch* (*Liuzu tanjing* 六祖壇經, hereafter *Platform Scripture*), the most influential Chan work to survive the Tang.<sup>35)</sup>

35) The *Platform Scripture's* critique of the buddha-nature of the insentient doctrine is often overlooked. It is apparent in the transmission verses associated with the six patriarchs that are appended to the end of the Dunhuang versions of the text. In the Dunhuang recension the key verse, attributed to Hongren, reads: “Sentient beings come and lay down seeds, and insentient flowers grow. Without sentiency and without seeds, the ground of mind produces nothing. 有情來下種、無情花即生。無情又無種、心地亦無生” (T.2007: 48.344b9-10; cf. Yampolsky 1967, 177). A somewhat altered version is found in the *Zutang ji* (Yanagida 1984, 1.85.11-12) and the *Jingde chuandeng lu* 景德傳燈錄 (T.2076: 51.223a17-18), as well as in the later Song recension of the *Platform Scripture*, in which the verse has been moved into the autobiographical section of Huineng's narrative and incorporated into the secret transmission from Hongren to Huineng: “Sentient beings come and lay down seeds, and from the earth fruit is produced. Without sentiency and without seeds there is no [buddha-]

The *Platform Scripture* is too complex to discuss in detail here, but many scholars would agree that its doctrinal position represents a conflation of Yogācāra and Madhyamaka perspectives. (Some might characterize it as a valiant if ultimately doomed attempt to synthesize the substantialist claims of the *Awakening of Faith* with the anti-foundationalist teachings of the *Prajñāpāramitā*.) For the purposes of the present discussion, I would like to turn briefly to the celebrated “poetry contest” in the autobiographical portion of the text. The unknown author(s) of the text intended the dueling verses by Shenxiu and Huineng to encapsulate the fundamental differences between their schools, and thus it is significant that the authors/compiler of this classic work struggled in their attempts to articulate the crux of Huineng’s position.<sup>36)</sup>

According to Huineng’s famous (but no doubt largely fictitious) autobiographical narrative, Shenxiu, under duress, wrote the following brief verse to set forth his understanding of Chan.

The body is the Bodhi tree,  
 The mind is like a clear mirror.  
 At all times we must strive to polish it,  
 And must not let the dust collect.<sup>37)</sup>

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nature and nothing is produced. 有情來下種、因地果還生。無情即無種、無性亦無生”(T.2008: 48.349a26-27); see the discussion in Sharf 2007, 218-219.

36) Again, there is a large literature on this subject; for a recent analysis of the verses see Gregory 2012.

37) T.2007: 48.337c1-2: 身是菩提樹、心如明鏡臺。時時勤拂拭、莫使有塵埃。(Kōshōji and Jingshan Tianningsi 金山天寧寺 editions: 有 = 染.) Trans. Yampolsky 1967, 130; cf. the Song vulgate text, T.2008: 48.348b24-25: 身是菩提樹心如明鏡臺時時勤拂拭勿使惹塵埃.

Anyone familiar with Chinese Buddhism will immediately recognize this as a fairly generic expression of buddha-nature doctrine as it had come to be understood in seventh- and eighth-century China. In this understanding, *tathāgatagarbha*/buddha-nature does not simply denote one’s innate potential for buddhahood—a potential that is phenomenally unavailable to the unawakened. Rather, buddha-nature is identified with the intrinsic nature of mind or consciousness itself and hence is always right before you, if only you know where to look. This immanentist understanding is arguably akin to the *dhātvavāda* and perennialist teachings that the Critical Buddhists find so objectionable; the “dust” that obscures the innate clarity of mind (the mirror) is precisely conceptual thought, and hence one only needs to cease thinking—to abandon conceptualization and critical discernment (*fenbie*)—to disclose one’s inner buddha.

The hero of the scripture, Huineng, will have none of it. The Dunhuang editions of the *Platform Scripture* record his first rejoinder (V1) as follows:

Bodhi originally has no tree,  
 The mirror also has no stand.  
 Buddha-nature is always clean and pure;  
 Where is there room for dust?<sup>38)</sup>

While the surface meaning of this verse (V1) is clear, its doctrinal purport is by no means obvious—it reminds one of the somewhat conflicting messages

38) T.2007: 48.338a7-8: 菩提本無樹、明鏡亦無臺。佛性 (S.5475 reads 姓) 常清 (S.5475 reads 青) 淨、何處有塵埃。Trans. Yampolsky 1967, 132.

one finds in the writings of Shenhui as well as in much of the *Platform Scripture* itself. The first two lines of the poem are a refutation of the reification of awakening (*bodhi*) and mind (mirror)—both are deemed empty or groundless (there is ultimately no tree and no stand), and thus it is a mistake to construe either as the goal of Chan practice. But the latter two lines affirm the inherent purity of an abiding buddha-nature, which seems at odds with the thrust of the first two lines. I suspect this affirmation of buddha-nature is what disturbed the early compilers of the text. In any event, something led them to consider an alternative response (V2), which is awkwardly included in the Dunhuang recension:

The mind is the Bodhi tree,  
 The body is the mirror stand.  
 The mirror is originally clean and pure;  
 Where can it be stained by dust?<sup>39)</sup>

This second version (V2) has eliminated the overt reference to buddha-nature, but the overall effect is not necessarily an improvement as an *alternative* to the teaching of Shenxiu. V2, like V1, rejects the mediations of practice (there is no need for polishing), but it does so not by affirming the intrinsic purity of buddha-nature, but rather the intrinsic purity of mind (mirror), and perhaps, by association, the body (the mirror stand). Some might consider this an advance, insofar as intrinsic purity is now located in

39) T.2007: 48.338a10-11: 心是菩提樹、身為明鏡臺。明鏡本清淨、何處染塵埃。Trans. Yampolsky 1967, 132.

the conventional (mind/body) rather than the ultimate (buddha-nature), but it remains a bit of a muddle, and I doubt it would garner the approval of the Critical Buddhists.

That the redactors of the Dunhuang recensions include *both* verses without a hint of pretext suggests that the misgivings I articulate are not mine alone. The redactors could not seem to decide which verse, if either, was better. But the most convincing piece of evidence that these verses were deemed unsatisfactory is the fact that both were eventually replaced by a third version (V3) that would, I suspect, win the approbation of a Critical Buddhist:

Bodhi originally has no tree,  
 The bright mirror also is not a stand.  
 Originally there is not a single thing,  
 What is there to attract dust?<sup>40)</sup>

In this composition, which is eventually canonized in the Song Dynasty vulgate text, the compiler retains the more apophatic opening two lines of V1: *bodhi* and mind are both said to be empty or groundless (no tree and no stand). In addition, the problematic third line in V1 has now been replaced with the unambiguous declaration “originally there is not a single thing.” In other words, not only is there no body and no mind, there is also no mirror, no purity, and no buddha-nature. And notice also how the fourth line has

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40) T.2008: 48.349a7-8: 菩提本無樹、明鏡亦非臺。本來無一物、何處惹塵埃。 See also the discussion of earlier manuscript witnesses of this verse in Yampolsky 1967, 94 n.17.

been altered: rather than proclaiming that the mirror can't be stained by dust, as we find in V1 and V2, we now learn that there is nothing to attract dust in the first place. Shenhui's writings may be muddled, and indeed, the *Platform Scripture* is itself far from philosophically consistent, but after earlier failures, Huineng's verse—the poetic witness to his awakening—has attained its final form, a philosophically cogent expression of the gist of the *Prajñāpāramitā*.

To recap, Shenhui was taken aback by aspects of the Northern Chan teachings that, to his mind, inappropriately reify the goal of practice, fetishize meditation, and devalue ethical action and scriptural learning. In articulating his alternative, Shenhui foregrounds the notion of non-abiding found in the *Vajracchedikā-sūtra*. With time and some textual tweaking, this teaching finally makes its way into Huineng's famous verse, and its uncompromising assertion that there is nothing whatsoever to hold to (*benlai wu yi wu* 本來無一物), including mind and buddha-nature itself.

## By Way of a Conclusion

Some may view the Critical Buddhist claim that *dhātvavāda* is “not Buddhism” as an anachronistic conceit—it is predicated on a romanticized notion of “authentic Buddhism” that reflects post-war Japanese social and ethical mores. But we have seen that traces of a similar critique can be found within the early Chan community, as preserved in the debates surrounding the buddha-nature of the insentient and the notion of mindlessness.



The Southern Chan masters, much like Matsumoto and Hakamaya, were concerned with the scriptural warrant for the immanent buddha-nature idea. But their anxiety over the origins and orthodoxy of the *tathāgatagarbha*/buddha-nature doctrine was nothing new—the early *tathāgatagarbha* scriptures betray a similar anxiety, as they tacitly acknowledge that the doctrine is close to, if not identical with, the heretical *ātmavāda* teachings of the non-Buddhists.

To take but one example, the *Nirvāṇa-sūtra*, which some scholars regard as the earliest surviving *tathāgatagarbha* scripture (Radich 2015), tacitly concedes the non-Buddhist roots of the *tathāgatagarbha* idea. Evidence for this can be found throughout the text, but perhaps the most astonishing example is the second of the famous “five parables on buddha-nature” found in fascicle 7.

In addition, good man, consider the story of a caring woman and her infant son who had become ill. In distress, the woman sent for a physician, and when he arrived he mixed together a medicine made of three things: clarified butter, milk, and granulated honey. As he gave the mixture to her to feed to her child, the physician explained, “After the child takes the medicine, do not give him your milk. You may feed him only after the medicine is used up.” So the mother then smeared a bitter-tasting substance on her breasts and said to her young child, “My breasts are smeared with poison so you must not touch them.” When the child became hungry he wanted his mother’s milk, but hearing that her breasts were poisonous he pulled away from her. Eventually the medicine was used up, whereupon the mother washed her breasts with

water and called out to her son, “Come and I shall give you milk.” But at that point, though the little boy felt hunger and thirst, what he had heard earlier about the poison prevented him from approaching her. The mother then told him, “It was only because I was giving you medicine that I used the poison! Now that the medicine is finished I have cleaned myself completely, so you may come and drink from my breasts without bitterness.” Upon hearing this, the infant gradually returned and resumed his feeding.

Good man, the Tathāgata is just like this. It was for the sake of saving everyone that I [previously] taught living beings to cultivate the teaching of non-self, [explaining that] after practicing in this manner they will end their egotism forever and attain *nirvāṇa*, thereby dispelling the erroneous views of the mundane world and reveal a supramundane dharma. In addition, I showed that what is commonly taken as the self is fallacious and not real. Cultivating the teaching of non-self is therefore meant to cleanse one’s identity. Just as in this parable of the woman who smeared her breast with bitter flavor for the sake of her child, in like manner the Tathāgata explained that dharmas are all without self in order to [lead his followers to] cultivate emptiness. And just as that woman called her child only after washing her breasts because she wanted him to resume feeding, I also choose this particular moment now to expound the *tathāgatagarbha*. For this reason, *bhikṣus*, do not be afraid! Like that small child who gradually returned to drink his mother’s milk after hearing her calling him, similarly the *bhikṣus* should each recognize that it cannot be the case that they don’t possess the *tathāgatagarbha*.<sup>41)</sup>

41) *Dabanniepan jing* 大般涅槃經, translated ca. 421-432 by \*Dharmakṣema, T.374: 12.407b29-c19: 復次善男子。譬如女人生育一子嬰孩得病。是女愁惱求覓醫師。醫師既來合三種藥。酥乳石蜜。

After listening to this parable, Kāśyapa, apparently in some distress, takes issue with the Buddha, rattling off, in digest form, a series of arguments for the Buddhist doctrine of non-self. In response, the Buddha launches into yet another parable, meant to reassure the flustered bodhisattva that the non-self teaching was provisional, and the time has now come to embrace the ultimate teaching of the *ātman*.

What is remarkable in this parable is the frank admission that *tathāgatagarbha* is none other than the *ātman* taught by the pre-Buddhist “heretics.” That is to say, *tathāgatagarbha* is the mother’s milk (the monistic doctrine of the *Upaniṣads* that teaches the true and eternal self) that nourished the child *before* the doctor (the Buddha) came along and diagnosed an illness. The bitter salve placed on the mother’s breast is the Buddha’s distinctive teaching of non-self; it is a short-term contrivance required while the medicine does its work. Once the course of treatment is complete, the child (a follower of the Buddha) is free to return to his mother’s milk (*ātman cum tathāgatagarbha*). I cannot imagine better grist for the Critical Buddhist’s mill.

Chan, like many schools of Chinese Buddhism, was trying to square the circle—to find a way to marry the metaphysical monism of the *tathāgatagarbha*

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與之令服因告女人。兒服藥已且莫與乳。須藥消已爾乃與之。是時女人即以苦物用塗其乳。母語兒言。我乳毒塗不可復觸。小兒渴乏欲得母乳。聞乳毒氣便遠捨去。遂至藥消母人以水淨洗其乳。喚其子言。來與汝乳。是時小兒雖復飢渴。先聞毒氣是故不來。母復語言。為汝服藥故以毒塗。汝藥已消我已洗竟。汝便可來飲乳無苦。是兒聞已漸漸還飲。善男子。如來亦爾。為度一切教諸衆生修無我法。如是修已永斷我心入於涅槃。為除世間諸妄見故。示現出過世間法故。復示世間計我虛妄非真實故。修無我法清淨身故。喻如女人為其子故以苦味塗乳。如來亦爾。為修空故說言諸法悉無有我。如彼女人淨洗乳已而喚其子欲令還服。我今亦爾說如來藏。是故比丘不應生怖。如彼小兒聞母喚已漸還飲乳。比丘亦爾。應自分別如來祕藏不得有。

Trans. Blum 2013, 227-229, with changes; see also the discussion in Radich 2015, 25-26.

teachings—a monism that resonated with certain pre-Buddhist Chinese notions of the primordial dao 道 as the singular source of all things—with the anti-metaphysical teachings of emptiness. Of course, the Chinese were not alone in this; later scholastic systems in India and Tibet were similarly dedicated to forging a Madhyamaka-Yogācāra synthesis. The Indians and Tibetans were, however, acutely aware of the philosophical challenges—that there were profound if not insurmountable differences separating the Madhyamaka and Yogācāra positions. The Chinese, in contrast, were not always sensitive to the underlying conceptual quandaries, and tended to take recourse in literary evocation rather than sustained argument.

I have suggested, however, that at least one faction within the early Chan community recognized the problem and resisted the overtly monistic or immanentist reading of buddha-nature doctrine in favor of a more deconstructive and “critical” approach. This resistance—first articulated, if somewhat haltingly, in writings attributed to Huineng and Shenhui—survives in the more discursive and analytical strands of later Chan, embodied, for example, in the playful but relentlessly anti-foundationalist rhetoric of the *Wumenguan* 無門關 (Sharf forthcoming). But this was to remain a minority position. For most, the comforts offered by the *tathāgatagarbha* teachings, like warm milk at the mother’s breast, would prove more alluring.

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## Abstract

## Buddha-nature, Critical Buddhism, and Early Chan

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This article begins with a reflection on why medieval Chinese Buddhist thought has not been more conspicuous in recent comparative work on Buddhism and Western philosophy. The Japanese proponents of “Critical Buddhism” (*hihan bukkō* 批判仏教), Matsumoto Shirō 松本史朗 and Hakamaya Noriaki 袴谷憲昭, would see this neglect as merited since, in their view, East Asian Buddhism in general, and Chinese Chan in particular, is philosophically crippled owing to its embrace of *tathāgatagarbha* and buddha-nature thought. Indeed, Matsumoto singles out Shenhui 荷澤神會 (670-762), one of the architects of the Southern School of Chan, as an example of the early Chan advocacy of buddha-nature doctrine.

This article is not concerned with whether buddha-nature and *tathāgatagarbha* thought is actually deleterious to critical philosophical work. Rather, the

concern is to demonstrate that, far from embracing buddha-nature doctrine, the eighth-century founders of Southern Chan had serious concerns with it. Evidence for this is found in: (1) the writings of Shenhui, notably in his opposition to the doctrine of the “buddha-nature of insentient objects” (*wuqing foxing* 無情佛性); and (2) the *Platform Scripture of the Sixth Patriarch* (*Liuzu tanjing* 六祖壇經), particularly in the variant versions of Huineng’s famous “enlightenment verse.” Thus the Southern School may be viewed as a forerunner of the Critical Buddhist anti-*dhātuvāda* polemics. The article closes with comments on the ongoing problems Chinese Buddhist exegetes had in marrying the metaphysical monism of Yogācāra and *tathāgatagarbha* teachings with the anti-foundationalist thrust of Madhyamaka and *Prajñāpāramitā* literature.

**Keywords** : Chan, buddha-nature, *tathāgatagarbha*, Shenhui, *Platform Scripture*, Critical Buddhism.

2017년 4월 26일 투고  
2017년 6월 2일 심사완료  
2017년 12월 5일 게재확정