

A Perennial Dilemma: Chan Disputes about Buddha-Nature

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In his masterful rewriting of Chan history, John McRae had to leave out much of the larger context of Buddhist history, hoping that others would fill in the gaps. One can hardly fault him for so doing, since the limitations of any particular scholar, even one so accomplished as McRae, are real and unavoidable. His presentation of Chan history and the Northern school certainly made me abandon the romantic history of Chan that I had learned from scholars like Heinrich Dumoulin.¹ McRae was deeply moved (as was I) by the many books on Chan that graced the 1960s and 70s. But even in his deep delving into the history of Chinese Chan, McRae was quite aware of the omissions, both in the romantic view that he critiqued and in his own work:

I look forward to the possibility that other scholars might evaluate the relationship between these conceptual matrixes in both Indian Buddhist doctrine and traditional Chinese philosophy, subjects that I have intentionally avoided due to consideration of space.²

There is a clear need to see medieval Chan in its *Sitz im Leben* among other schools, both more immediately in China and more distantly in its roots in India, for the issues Chan raised at the time of Shenxiu and Shenhui were not new, but had been part and parcel of Mahāyāna developments over the centuries. Our earliest Buddhist texts, the Pāli Nikāyas and their Chinese counterparts, the Āgamas, described the awakening of the Buddha Śākyamuni as insight into the causes for

1. Heinrich Dumoulin, *Zen Buddhism: A History*, trans. James W. Heisig and Paul F. Knitter (New York: Macmillan, 1988).

2. John R. McRae, *The Northern School and the Formation of Early Ch'an Buddhism* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1986), 253.

suffering, reversing those causes by that awakening insight to practice a middle path, but not as the realization of an innate buddha-nature. The Abhidharma ontology mapped out that path by identifying the core nature of things, so as to enable people to see clearly and likewise abandon the causes of suffering and attain liberation. But its theory was highly scholastic and monastic, eventually triggering a Mahāyāna reversal in the Prajñāpāramitā scriptures and Nāgārjuna's Mādhyamika, which proclaimed all things to be empty of any core reality.

In its turn, Mahāyāna's teaching of emptiness (*śūnyatā*) triggered some confusion and many conundrums in Buddhist India. Some attempted to accept this central teaching of emptiness as universal, without exception: everything is empty, including our inmost nature. But a basic problem remained: If all things and all views about any of those things are empty, what is the way forward? If the Three Jewels of Buddha, Dharma, and Saṅgha are empty, where can one turn to take refuge? The Mādhyamika school, which built on the Prajñāpāramitā scripture, taught that emptiness (*śūnyatā*) entailed seeing dharmas (things) and that Dharma teachings are coterminous with their dependent arising (*pratītya-samutpāda*). It sketched a middle path (*madhyama*) that did not pretend to the ontological certainty of Abhidharma, but that did emphasize the dependently arisen status of conventional Buddhist teaching, rejecting essentialist categories but affirming the conventional truth and efficacy of the conventional teachings that arise from within their consensual contexts. In a similar vein, other Indian Mahāyāna thinkers developed the Yogācāra philosophy, which addressed that pervasive emptying by developing a critical understanding of conscious interiority, both to affirm the universality of emptiness and to assert the efficacious status of the Dharma teaching as a quite truly conventional truth.³ The texts of the *tathāgatagarbha* lineage in India, however, made a countermove. They restricted the scope of emptiness, leaving outside its purview the really real reality of the seed/womb (*garbha*) of a buddha (*tathāgata*) that lies secure beneath the surface of our consciousness; it is that consciousness that is the deluded field needing to be emptied.

3. See John P. Keenan, *A Study of the Buddhābhūmyupadeśa: The Doctrinal Development of the Notion of Wisdom in Yogācāra Thought* (Berkeley: Institute of Buddhist Studies and Bukkyō Dendō Kyōkai America, 2014), 13–66, 87–104, and 141–97.

The implications of these contrasting responses were profound, and reverberated through India into China, where the *tathāgatagarbha* teachings soon became the norm, probably because they echoed already familiar Daoist notions of our original nature.⁴ For whatever reason, most Chinese Buddhists were not drawn to the Yogācāra philosophy, which internalized emptiness within a critical understanding of consciousness; they instead embraced the *tathāgatagarbha* teaching that seals the basic nature of the pure mind off from any notion of emptiness. Classical Mādhyamika and Yogācāra philosophy focus on understanding the karmically defiled nature of consciousness, encouraging people to embark on the path of practice that they might experience a transformation from karmic consciousness to the wisdom of a buddha. For *tathāgatagarbha* proponents, however, the pure nature of basic consciousness means that karmic defilements are not so deeply rooted, but rather lie on the surface of an originally pure mind, much as dirt might accidentally cover a golden statue.⁵ But in India the *tathāgatagarbha* tradition never became a specific school that challenged Mādhyamika and Yogācāra, being regarded more as a skillful

4. Particularly in Zhuangzi, where in the chapter “Webbed Toes,” true, non-Confucian righteousness means not losing the original form of our inborn nature (彼正正者，不失其性命之情). See Burton Watson, *The Complete Works of Chuang Tzu* (New York: Columbia University, 1968), 98, where he notes that “here we encounter for the first time in the *Chuang Tzu* the term *hsing* or “unborn nature,” which is so important in Confucian thought.” The notion appear also in “Horses’ Hoofs,” where the absence of desire in “uncarved simplicity” enables people to “attain their true nature” (素樸而民性得矣) (ibid., 105). “Mending the Inborn Nature” (繕性) constitutes a full chapter when the danger of abandoning this inborn nature (去性) leads to false views and confusion.

5. Reflected commonly in Chan. See John R. McRae, “The Story of Early Ch’an,” in *Zen: Tradition and Transition—A Sourcebook by Contemporary Zen Masters and Scholars*, ed. Kenneth Kraft (New York: Grove, 1988), 131: “The underlying rationale for this teaching [of Hung-jen’s *shou-hsin* 守心, ‘maintaining awareness of the mind’] was the idea of Buddha-nature immanently within all sentient beings, described by the metaphor of the sun: ‘There is an adamant Buddha-nature within the bodies of sentient beings. Like the sun, it is essentially bright, perfect, and complete. Although vast and limitless, it is covered by the layered clouds of the five *skandhas* (aggregates). Like a lamp inside a jar, its light cannot shine.... [But] through such [meditative] practices the illusions will eventually fall away of themselves.’”

teaching to bolster the faith of people who were less inclined or able to delve into Nāgārjuna or Asaṅga. The very notion of emptiness, it was reported, made some people despondent.⁶

Meanwhile, for the philosophically inclined, the classical schools of Mādhyamika and Yogācāra rejected the earlier Abhidharma ontology and drew upon the Prajñāpāramitā sutras, employing emptiness as the refutation of any stable core being (*svabhāva*) within things or within our views about things. The Mādhyamika took on Abhidharma in a consistent and logical refutation, and, in their train, the Yogācāra thinkers explicated the nature of emptiness by developing an understanding of consciousness as itself empty and thus dependently arisen—both when it engenders defiled clinging and when it turns away from defilement toward a transformative conversion of consciousness into wisdom. Nāgārjuna famously equates the emptiness of essence with the dependent arising of all things, identifying that with the dependent arising of the middle path.⁷ In similar fashion, in its critical context, Yogācāra focuses on the interdependent nature of the mind, rejecting all attempts to capture ultimate truth and thereby enabling them to valorize the conventional efficacy of the Dharma teaching and practice.

Thus, I cannot take at face value McRae's characterization of Indian philosophy as transcendent, while Chinese Chan emphasizes the interdependence of things.

It would be useful to compare the descriptions of *bodhi* in Indian philosophical texts with those of enlightenment experience in Chan texts. Where the former described the ultimate goal in terms of wisdom and transcendence, I suspect the Chinese texts tend to greater emphasis

6. The early fifth-century *Ratnagotravibhāga-śāstra* lists five defects with emptiness, the first of which is that it causes depression. That is followed by contempt for those unable to understand, pride, denigrating what is true, and negating virtue. See Takasaki Jikidō, *A Study of the Ratnagotravibhāga (Uttaratantra): Being a Treatise on the Tathāgatarbha Theory of Mahāyāna Buddhism* (Rome: Instituto Italiano per il Medio ed Estremo Oriente, 1966), 305–6.

7. His *Madhyamikakārikā* 24:18 teaches: “It is dependent co-arising that I term emptiness. This is a descriptive designation grounded on [dependent arising] and is the middle path.” Yaḥ pratīyasamutpādaḥ śūnyatāṃ tām pracakṣmahe / sā prajñaptir upādāya pratipat saiva madhyāmā // T. 30: 33b. See Nagao Gadjin, *The Foundational Standpoint of Mādhyamika Philosophy*, trans. John P. Keenan (Albany: SUNY Press, 1989), 8–17.

on realizations of the interdependence of all things. Or one might examine whether the rhetoric of *śūnyatā* is used differently in Indian and Chinese texts, with the former being used to obliterate worldly distinctions, and the latter being used in effect to reify them. (The “originary enlightenment” theories of medieval Japanese Buddhism seem to fit this latter case.) Obviously, the incredible genre issues between the sources available from South and East Asia make any such comparisons difficult, but these are the sorts of theoretical issues that we are only now becoming able to address.⁸

“The rhetoric of *śūnyatā* is used differently” in Indian texts because it served as a refutation to Abhidharma ontology with its assertion of an inner essence (*svabhāva*) that can be clearly identified by proper analysis. But this does not mean that Indian Mahāyāna “obliterated worldly distinctions,” but rather that they interpreted them within the dependently arisen and conventional context of a conventional truth (*saṃvṛti-satya*). By contrast, China had never known any native Abhidharma ontology that required emptying, so they could not receive emptiness in its Indian context. Moreover, the Chinese had never delved into any sustained critical examination of phenomenal consciousness, so when Xuanzang (602–664) tried to correct the amalgamation of Yogācāra and *tathāgatagarbha* ideas already present in China by bringing classical Yogācāra into China, his Faxiang school (法相宗) could not but appear to be foreign and alien. The cultures of India and China were as different as Saudi Arabia and Japan are today. Whereas in India the Mādhyamika notion of emptiness refuted Abhidharma claims to uncover the essences (*svabhāva*) of things, in Daoist and Confucian China there were no essences to refute. Thus, emptiness in China lost its Indian focus and became a Buddhist synonym for the void, the empty hinge that turns the Daoist cosmos. It was a natural move, for Daoist texts had already spoken of emptiness.

In China, then, the Yogācāra focus on consciousness underwent a massive re-employment, since its classical form had never really taken hold outside monastic study halls. Not only was there was little interest in the alien critical philosophy of the phenomenal mind, but there was great distaste for the Yogācāra teaching that some sentient beings

8. John R. McRae, *Seeing through Zen: Encounter, Transformation, and Genealogy in Chinese Chan Buddhism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 150.

simply did not have any potential for awakening.⁹ Instead, what remained popular among Chinese Buddhists were the earlier Yogācāra schools that had already been introduced into China, the Dilun and Shelun. Both followed *tathāgatagarbha* thinking and taught that all sentient beings do have a pure mind, using the analysis of the defiled mind but lessening its impact as merely a surface covering of adventitious defilement. The earliest schools of Chinese Yogācāra were not that of Asaṅga and Vasubandhu, but the Dilun and Shelun schools, which relied on Paramārtha (499–569) and departed from the Indian Yogācāra masters to sketch the innate mind of pure wisdom. The Dilun school (地論宗) is named for the *Daśabhūmika* treatise (十地經論), and devoted its attention to that bodhisattva path (十地), but they argued about what lay at the base of the mind. Similarly, the Shelun school (攝論宗), following Paramārtha's amalgamation of classical Yogācāra and *tathāgatagarbha* teachings in his translation of the *Mahāyānasamgraha* and its commentaries, devoted itself consistently to examining the pure mind of wisdom, the *amala-vijñāna*, pure consciousness.

But before tracing these Chinese developments, it is best to go back to the Indian record to see the stark choices set for later Buddhists between classical Mahāyāna and *tathāgatagarbha* themes, for their contrasting teachings launched a grand question that endured over centuries and across national and cultural boundaries.¹⁰ Either the mind is really entrapped in karmic defilement, in which case one does need assiduously to practice the path in all of its ten bodhisattva stages; or the mind is originally pure, in which case all that is needed is to see into the illusory nature of defilements for them to disappear and the pure mind to shine in all its luster. The issue is a perennial one in philosophy and religion.

Perhaps the earliest appearance in Sanskrit literature of the term *tathāgatagarbha* is in the “Bodhi” chapter of the *Mahāyānasūtrālaṅkāra* (ca. 425), which speaks of that *garbha* (seed/womb) as present in all

9. Keenan, *Study of the Buddhābhūmyupadeśa*, 230, 296.

10. Following Paul of Tarsus, Augustine and the Protestant Reformers insisted that we are born into a world of sin and delusion, which among some Christians elicits a countermove to insist on our original goodness. Traditional Christian theology concurs that originally we were born in paradisiacal grace, but then came the fall.

sentient beings.¹¹ But it admits of different interpretations. In describing the profundity of the undefiled realm, in verse 9:37 the text says:

Although suchness is within all [living beings] without differentiation,
When it is pure,
It is the essence of all *tathāgatas*.
And so all living beings possess its embryo.¹²

A major conundrum arises in verses 22–37 of the “Bodhi” chapter, for if the reality of the *garbha* is pure, how do we account for its present defilement among beings? Are the defilements real and thus actually need to be removed by assiduous practice? Or, since the *garbha* is itself pure, are the defilements not real but merely surface delusions, not needing to be removed, but merely to be seen through?¹³

The commentary included in the prose sections of the *Mahāyānasūtrālaṅkāra* explains that verse 29 refers to the *tathāgata-garbha*, which all sentient being either *have* or *are*. The prose sections of the *Mahāyānasūtrālaṅkāra*, which constitute an enclosed commentary on the verse sections, explains:

11. I am relying on Paul J. Griffiths, “Painting the Space with Colors: Tathāgatagarbha in the *Mahāyānasūtrālaṅkāra* IX: 22–37,” in *Buddha Nature: A Festschrift in Honor of Minoru Kiyota* (Reno: Buddhist Books International, 1990), 41–93.

12. Sarveṣāṃ aviśiṣṭāpi / tathatā śuddhim āgatā / tathāgatatvaṃ tasmāc ca / yadgarbhāḥ sarvadehinaḥ //

13. McRae raises the issue in *Seeing through Zen*, 42: “Like the Buddha’s enlightenment, the experience of understanding is ineffable, but its impact is liberating. It is axiomatic throughout the Buddhist tradition that the perfect understanding of the human situation yields one’s liberation from the deleterious effects of that situation.” 161n30: “It would be intriguing to ponder why this is the case—why indeed should understanding imply liberation? That is, I believe, a most fundamental assumption of the Buddhist tradition, so basic that it is simply never addressed.... However, this topic must be left for another occasion.” Yet, in *Yogācāra*, it is not just an ineffable understanding that issues in enlightenment, but the transformation of conscious patterns that free one from attachment to imagined realities as the framework for the real, that is to say, one must eliminate not only the obstacle to understanding (*jñeya-āvaraṇā*) but also the obstacle of the passions (*kleśa-āvaraṇā*). Understanding alone will not have the desired outcome.

There is *tathatā* in all beings without distinction, while the Tathāgata has it as his nature in pure form. Hence it is said that all living beings possess [or are] the seed of a *tathāgata* (*sarvasattvāḥ tathāgatagarbha*).¹⁴

By the rules of Sanskrit grammatical interpretation, the commentarial phrase *sarva-sattvāḥ-tathāgatagarbha* can mean either that sentient beings (*sarva-sattvāḥ*) have that buddha seed/womb (*tathāgatagarbha*), or that they are that pure *garbha*. If understood to mean that “all living beings possess the *garbha* of a *tathāgata*,” then, even though all have the potential to become buddhas, the weight and tenacity of the obstacles to becoming a buddha may prevent some (many) from doing so. This was most likely the common understanding in India. But if we interpret that “all sentient beings are the *garbha* of the Tathāgata,” then all obstacles and defilements surely will be swept away, becoming not so very potent or important, because our basic nature is that pure seed/womb. There are then no sentient beings who cannot or will not become what they already are: buddhas.

Even at the early stage of the *Mahāyānasūtrālamkāra* (ca. 425), Tathāgatagarbha ideas appear and the text does affirm the original purity of the mind (*citta-prakṛti-prabhāsvaratā*) and the adventitious nature of defilement (*āgantuka-kleśa*),¹⁵ setting the stage for much later discussion and disagreement. These questions, I would contend, reverberated in their Chinese counterparts and, I think, appear once again in medieval Chan, when Shenhui attacked Shenxiu for preaching a “gradual” approach, rather than just the “sudden” experience of seeing into one’s true buddha mind. But the issue in China was not a repeat of the Indian situation, for all Chan masters adopted the stance that the buddha nature is present within all beings and becomes manifest when one does not give rise to discriminative thinking or talk too much.¹⁶ The philosophic alternatives in India—between affirmation of

14. Sylvan Lévi, *Mahāyāna-sūtrālamkāra: Exposé de la Doctrine du Grand Véhicule* (Paris: Honoré Champion, 1907), 58; Ui Hakuju, *Daijōshōgonkyō* (Tokyo: Iwanami, 1961), 202.

15. Keenan, *Study of the Buddhābhūmyupadeśa*, 88.

16. Bernard Faure, *The Rhetoric of Immediacy: A Cultural Critique of Chan/Zen Buddhism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991), 77: “One may reinterpret from this point of view the Chan discourse on non-duality, ‘returning to the principle,’ as a makeshift response to the actual situation provoked by the epistemological cut initiated by the doctrine of the Buddha-nature and leading to the theory of the twofold truth. In theory, the two truths

a pure root mind or insistence on the karmically defiled nature of all consciousness—simply never came into play in Chan China. So Chan, together with most other Chinese Buddhist traditions, continued the pure mind theory of the *Mahāyānasūtrālaṅkāra*:

When water is turbid and then clears, its clarity is not produced by that [turbidity], but precisely by the settling of taints. The principle is just the same in the purification of the mind itself. It is accepted that the mind, which is always originally luminous (*prakṛtiprabhāsvaraṃ*) is flawed by adventitious faults. It is decreed that there is no other mind apart from the mind of reality (*dharmatācitta*), which is originally luminous (*prabhāsvaratvaṃ prakṛtau*).¹⁷

The classical Yogācāra of Asaṅga and Vasubandhu spent much energy in uncovering the structure and activity of consciousness as it is karmically befuddled by the obstacle to the true knowledge (*jñeyā-āvaraṇa*) of emptiness, which emerges from imagining things to be real and not empty, in turn entangling people in the passions (*kleśā-āvaraṇa*) of saṃsāra by valorizing those various passions that discourage engagement in path practices. But the texts from the marginal Tathāgatagarbha tradition in India and from the Chinese Shelun and Chan traditions did not function within the philosophic context of the classical Mādhyamika and Yogācāra philosophies of India. They placed within all beings the really real and really pure *garbha* of a buddha—in Chinese, our innate buddha-nature (佛性); and thus, all obstacles are regarded as merely adventitious (*āgantuka-mala*) and can be seen through simply by gaining insight into that one true nature—in Chan terms, seeing into one’s buddha-nature (見性 *jianxin*; *kenshō*).¹⁸

are affirmed only to be negated by the middle way, which consist in seizing them simultaneously while acknowledging their hierarchy. In practice, however, more precisely in Chan practice, conventional truth tends to be negated for the sake of ultimate truth.” In classical Yogācāra, the conventional truth is emptied in order to affirm its enduring and efficacious truth, not to be negated. See Wendi L. Adamek, *The Mystique of Transmission: On an Early Chan History and its Context* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), 174: “In other words, Chan rhetoric of the ‘sudden’ attempts to preclude provisional truth and gradual practice.”

17. Lévi, *Mahāyāna-sūtrālaṅkāra*, 24; Ui, *Daijōshōgonkyō*, 109.

18. John R. McRae, “Shen-hui and the Teaching of Sudden Enlightenment in Early Ch’an Buddhism,” in *Sudden and Gradual: Approaches to Enlightenment in Chinese Thought*, ed. Peter N. Gregory, 169–252 (Honolulu: University of Hawaii

But although the classical Mahāyāna schools in India regarded *tathāgatagarbha* ideas as mere devices for those who needed them, there are a significant number of *tathāgatagarbha* scriptures and commentaries from India, some of which figured in Chan history. The early fifth-century *Ratnagoṭravibhāgaśāstra*, the only *śāstra* devoted solely to *tathāgatagarbha* thinking, states the purpose of this teaching in more explicit terms.

It has been said here and there [in the scriptures] that all things are to be known everywhere as being “unreal,” like clouds, [visions in] a dream, and illusions. Whereas, why has the Buddha declared here that the essence of Buddha (*buddhadhātu*, rendered into Chinese as 如來藏) “exists” in every living being?¹⁹

Likewise, the *Śrīmālādevīsīṃhanāda-sūtra* addresses the underlying dilemma, not by developing a theory of the nature of consciousness but by affirming that, although there are these adventitious defilements, consciousness is indeed intrinsically pure. If one cannot understand how this can be, then it should be accepted through faith in the Tathāgata. Likewise, the *Tathāgatagarbha-sūtra* shows by a series of nine metaphors that, although sentient beings are involved in various kinds of defilements, yet they are always in possession of the embryo or germ (*garbha*) of a *tathāgata*, which remains always undefiled.²⁰ Thus we read:

Press, 1987), 254: “For example, Shen-hui criticized the Northern school use of the term *li-nien*, the ‘transcendence of thoughts,’ which he felt implied a purposive or intentional effort to achieve a state of liberation—which would be a contradiction in terms. His alternative was *wu-nien* or ‘nonthought,’ by which he meant a level of consciousness ontologically prior to the discrimination of individual thoughts, or the source of liberation already immanent in sentient beings. Although the terms *li-nien* and *wu-nien* differ very little in their original meanings, Shen-hui favored the latter because it had the appearance of being less dualistic.” Perhaps the issue for Shenhui was simply that transcending thought appeared to seek enlightenment from a space apart from the innate mind of Buddha, that is, from the Buddha’s Dharma teaching. By contrast, *wu-nien* means that once one disallows thinking, buddhahood appears spontaneously of its own accord, suddenly and lustrously.

19. Takasaki, *Study of the Ratnagoṭravibhāga*, 305.

20. Keenan, *Study of the Buddhābhūmyupadeśa*, 58.

All sentient beings, although they are in defiled bodies in all the destinies, have *tathāgatagarbha*, which is always undefiled.²¹

The classical Yogācāra of Asaṅga and Vasubandhu taught that there was a preconscious level to our minds, the *ālaya* consciousness, which carried all the karmic seeds (*sarva-bīja*) that throughout the generations entangled us in *saṃsāra*. But the *Laṅkāvatāra-sūtra*, among other scriptures and commentaries, synthesized *tathāgatagarbha* and *ālayavijñāna*, so that our basic nature remained pure and all the seed-energies merely surface occurrences. The *Laṅkāvatāra-sūtra* was linked to Shenxiu,²² which made him a proper target for Shenhui's attack. The Chan masters were familiar with the ideas in these Indian texts and drew upon them, probably because they lived in monasteries filled with monks from all schools of Buddhism.²³ The *Laṅkāvatāra-sūtra* teaches:

21. T. 16: 157c.

22. Adamek, *Mystique of Transmission*, 170: "Significantly, Shenhui's transmission is also linked to the Laṅkā: 'He upheld the Laṅkā, transmitting it as the mind essence. To go beyond this—there is no longer anyone who knows.' " From Yanagida Seizan, *Shoki zenshu shisō no kenkyū (Studies in the Historical Works of Early Ch'an)* (Kyoto: Hōzōkan, 1967), 499.

23. McRae, *Seeing through Zen*, 116: "Thus there simply were no independent 'Zen monasteries' as imagined by Dumoulin. They are a figment of the romantic imagination, and such rose-colored stereotyping always goes hand-in-hand with cynical dismissal." Rather the lineage identity of a particular monastery was dependent on its monastic administration, on who was its abbot, which by the ninth century were dominated by Chan abbots. McRae, *Seeing through Zen*, 117: "Scholars used to talk about Vinaya and Tiantai school monasteries as if they were separate types of institutions, but with a few trivial exceptions this simply was not the case. On the contrary, public monasteries incorporated activities of all the so-called 'schools' within their precincts—devotions to Amitābha Buddha, lectures on the *Flower Garland* and *Lotus* sutras, repentance rituals, and so forth—and it was only in the Abbot's position and the meditation hall that such a monastery was in any way 'Chan.' " See also Robert H. Scharf, "On Pure Land Buddhism and Ch'an/Pure Land Syncretism in Medieval China," *T'oung Pao* 88 (2002): 320: "I have argued that (1) there was no independent Pure Land school in China, that is, no historical lineage of Pure Land patriarchs and no distinctively 'Pure Land' approach to Pure Land scriptures or practice. Rather, (2) Pure Land cosmology and practice were part and parcel of Chinese Buddhism virtually from its inception. There were, needless to say, exegetes who specialized in Pure Land scriptures, meditation masters who emphasized *nien-fo*, and lay persons whose devotions were

Mahāmati, *tathāgatagarbha* holds within it the cause for both good and evil, and by it all the forms of existence are produced.... Because of the influence of the permeations that have been variously accumulating by false reasoning since beginningless time, what here goes under the name of *ālayavijñāna* is accompanied by the seven *vijñānas*, which give birth to a state known as the abode of ignorance. It is like a great ocean, in which the waves roll on permanently but the body [of the waters] itself subsists uninterruptedly, quite free from fault of impermanence, unconcerned with the doctrine of ego-substance, and thoroughly pure in its essential nature.²⁴

Here *tathāgatagarbha* is understood as the reality underlying the fundamental mind, while *ālayavijñāna* is just its name when defiled. Buddha mind is seen as originally pure in contrast to the other seven evolving consciousnesses.²⁵ This explanation reflects that of the *Śrīmāladeviśiṃhanāda-sūtra*, as the *Laṅkāvatāra* itself states: “This, Mahāmati, was told to me in the canonical text relating to Queen Śrīmāla....”²⁶ Takasaki Jikidō thus concludes that the *Laṅkāvatāra-sūtra* has amalgamated the *ālayavijñāna* with the *tathāgatagarbha* of the *Śrīmāladeviśiṃhanāda-sūtra*.²⁷

The point is that even in India, notions of an innate pure buddha mind were widespread, with many texts combining those notions with Yogācāra philosophy. Once the clouds of delusion are swept away, the pure mind shines like the sun. Such ideas are not specific to, or an innovation in, Chinese Chan.²⁸ Furthermore, in China the Yogācāra

centered on Amitābha and the aspiration for rebirth in his Pure Land, but they did not constitute anything resembling an independent tradition, much less a school. Our closest encounter with a ‘Pure Land movement’ was with the lay-oriented Lotus Societies that proliferated during the Sung, but even then we found that these societies were often affiliated with monks or monasteries belonging to Ch’an, Lü, or T’ien-t’ai lineages. Moreover, their devotional activities were not necessarily centered around Amitābha or his Pure Land.”

24. D. T. Suzuki, *The Laṅkāvatāra Sūtra: A Mahāyāna Text* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1932), 190. Confer Takasaki Jikidō. *Nyōraizō shisō no keisei* (Tokyo: Shunjūsha, 1974), 327–28.

25. Katsumata Shunkyo, *Bukkyō ni okeru shinishikisetsu no kenkyū* (Tokyo: Sankibo Busshorin, 1974), 625–26.

26. Suzuki, *Laṅkāvatāra Sūtra*, 192.

27. Takasaki, *Nyōraizō shisō no keisei*, 328.

28. Pace McRae, *Seeing through Zen*, 42: “The use of the Buddha-nature idea, the sun of enlightenment within all human beings (indeed, within all sentient

texts translated and composed by Paramārtha continued to assert the reality of the buddha mind, apart from emptiness. The *Awakening of Faith in the Mahāyāna*, widely popular in China and probably a composition in Chinese,²⁹ holds the doctrine of the original enlightenment of *tathāgatagarbha* and sees the *ālaya* as a devolution from that purity because of the evolutions of consciousness (*viññānapariṇāma*). In this text, the tension is entirely between this originally pure mind and its surface phenomenal defilement. Asaṅga's notion of the synergistic relationship between preconscious *ālaya* and the developing conscious states (*pravṛttivijñāna*) is lost, while one searches in vain for the basic analysis of the three patterns of consciousness (*trīsvabhāva*) that present a framework for conversion from the delusion of clinging to imagining reality to the perfection that can regain the interdependent functioning of the awakened mind. The *Awakening of Faith* is a Tathāgatagarbha text that incorporates some Yogācāra ideas to account for surface defilements, for its main focus is on the original purity of the mind of *tathāgatagarbha*. The text, whose teachings are echoed throughout Chan before Shenhui,³⁰ simply asserts that: "The causes of *saṃsāra* are sentient beings, because of the evolutions (轉, *pariṇāma*) of their minds and their mental consciousnesses. This means that due to *ālayavijñāna* ignorance (無明) exists."³¹ Hirakawa Akira explains this passage as follows: "In a word the cause of *saṃsāra* is the activities of the mind and

beings), the quality of non-discriminatory wisdom that is the sine qua non of buddhahood itself, is a profound innovation that separates proto-Chan and early Chan from early Indian Buddhism."

29. John P. Keenan, "The Doctrine of Buddha Nature in Chinese Buddhism: Hui-k'ai on Paramārtha," In *Buddha Nature: A Festschrift in Honor of Minoru Kiyota*, ed. Paul J. Griffiths and John P. Keenan (San Francisco: Buddhist Books International, 1991), 125–38.

30. McRae, *Northern School*, 223: "It should hardly need mentioning that the most fundamental assumptions of *The Awakening of Faith* are identical to those of Northern School doctrine."

31. Hakeda, *Awakening of Faith*, 47. See McRae, *Northern School*, 219: "In order to understand the *Wu fang-pien*, we must first consider at least part of the theoretical basis of *The Awakening of Faith*. As explained in an excellent modern commentary by Hirakawa Akira, this text espouses a certain kind of idealism, the 'mind-only' (*yuishin* or *wei-hsin* in Chinese), the fundamental orientation of which is different from the better-known 'consciousness-only' (*yuishiki*, *wei-shih* or *viññapti-mātra* in Sanskrit) theory."

mental consciousness. By the mind is meant *tathāgatagarbha*, inasmuch as the samsaric mind exists in dependence on *tathāgatagarbha*. *Tathatā*, which is neither born nor destroyed, in one respect does not maintain its own nature, and thus becomes *ālayavijñāna*, because of the conditioned arising of the permeations of ignorance.”³² It is not very hard to recognize here the Chan teaching that one is simply not to “activate the mind” and its many delusions, that one may then see into the pure buddha-nature.³³ That, however, is no easy task, which is why Chan constantly emphasizes meditation practice to gain insight into the buddha mind and rest constantly in that mind (守心).

Two trends, then, may be seen even in China in regard to the understanding of the relationship between the mind and its true and basic nature as suchness (*tathatā*). The option of Asaṅga and Vasubandhu, championed by Xuanzang, focuses consistently on a critical understanding of phenomenal consciousness, avoids attributing any ultimate purity to that consciousness, and thus can adequately describe the phenomenal, existential arising of consciousness as caught in verbal proliferation (*prapañca*) and discrimination (*vikalpa*), identifying its underlying structure as dependently arisen (*paratantra*), and explaining enlightenment as a complete, radical conversion of that basic consciousness, which, while occurring within that dependently arisen (*paratantra*) consciousness, is disjunctive with and different from those phenomenal states of consciousness. The only cause capable of bringing about such a disjunctive rupture of consciousness is then beyond our minds, to be found in the Dharma teaching, itself a gracious outflow for the all-encompassing reality of *dharmadhātu*, the reality of which was experienced by the Buddha and enunciated in his Dharma teaching. When that teaching is practiced, it leads to a redirection of the mind and a realization of wisdom. There is here no original pure mind, but the kerygmatic intent that people will engender the hope and commitment to hear and heed the Dharma teachings and enter into practice, only thereby reversing the karmic flow of delusion.

The same dilemma—between a not-empty buddha mind and a phenomenal mind entangled in its many delusions—is present also in the transmission of Indian texts into China. The Chinese schools of

32. Hakeda Yoshito, trans. and commentary, *The Awakening of Faith Attributed to Asvaghosha* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1967), 165.

33. McRae, *Seeing Through Zen*, 88–89.

Yogācāra reflect the Indian oscillation between classical Yogācāra and Tathāgatagarbha teachings. As Ui Hakuju notes in regard to the various schools of Chinese Yogācāra:

The differences in the theories of the three [Chinese] schools of Dilun (地論), Shelun (攝論), and Faxiang (法相) reflect the changes in the theories of the Yogācāra sect in India more than their interpretation in the history of Chinese Buddhism.³⁴

But in China the early Yogācāra texts were not the classical texts of Xuanzang's school (法相), but first the Dilun, later subsumed into the Shelun, the school that took Paramārtha's translation of Asaṅga's *Mahāyānasamgraha* as its charter and championed the added passages on *tathāgatagarbha* which Paramārtha inserted into Asaṅga's *Mahāyānasamgraha* from the *Ratnagotravibhāga*.³⁵

The Dilun school is the first appearance of Yogācāra in China. It focused on understanding its central text, the *Daśabhūmika-śāstra* of Vasubandhu, which would seem to recommend the full and incremental practice of the ten bodhisattva stages, a gradual stage by stage practice of the path. But almost from its inception, this Dilun school was divided into Northern and Southern sects, which perhaps serve as the paradigm for the dispute in the *Platform Sutra* between the Northern Chan of Shenxiu and the Southern Chan of Huineng and Shenhui. The proponents of each of these sects of Dilun trace their origin back to a dispute between Bodhiruci (active in China ca. 508–535) and Ratnamati (active ca. 508), who, while engaged in a joint translation of their *Daśabhūmika-śāstra*, could not agree upon the correct interpretation of *ālayavijñāna*. As reported by Zhangjian (產然, 711–782), the Sixth Patriarch of Tiantai:

Even before the [Chen] (557–587) and Liang (502–556) dynasties, the two masters of [Dilun] did not agree. The Northern sect held *ālaya* to be the support [of consciousness], while the Southern held *tathatā* to

34. Ui Hakuju, "Shintai sanzō ru ni kansuru ni-san mondai," in *Ui Hakuju chosaku senshū* (Tokyo: Daitō Shuppansha, 1966–68), VI:90.

35. See John P. Keenan, "Introduction," in *The Realm of Awakening: Chapter Ten of Asaṅga's Mahāyānasamgraha*, ed. Paul J. Griffiths et al. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 41–43.

be that support. Both masters looked to Vasubandhu, and yet their ideas were as different as fire and water.³⁶

Bernard Faure contends that within Chan the “will to orthodoxy” was expressed in the patriarchal lineages in their vertical relationships, tending to conceal horizontal influences from other Mahāyāna sources. “This primacy given to [patriarchal] genealogy and the tree-shaped schemas it imposes do not permit us to see the rhizomes, the tangled web of influence is actually at work beneath the surface.”³⁷ Despite the invisible roots and rhizomes, “the lives and works of Shenxiu and his disciples were enriched by Tiantai, Pure Land, Vinaya and Tantric influences.”³⁸ Shenhui was then contending for a purist Chan, criticizing Shenxiu for his broad learning,³⁹ which has resulted in an “eclecti-

36. *Fahua xuanyi shiqian*, T. 33: 942c. See John R. McRae, “Yanagida Seizan’s Landmark Works on Chinese Ch’an,” *Cahiers d’Extrême-Asie* 7 (1993): 67: “For the Chinese context, Yanagida, in his *Studies in the Historical Works of Early Ch’an* (Kyoto: Hōzōkan, 1967), 122, cites Zhangjan (Chan-jan, 711–782) to the effect that the ‘Southern School’ of Mādhyamika and other Mahāyāna traditions is identified with the southern court at Chin-ling or Nan-ching, in contrast to the exegetical traditions of the North or the syncretic T’ien-t’ai school. Therefore, Shen-hui’s adoption of the label Southern School was: ‘ultimately a rediscovery, not an innovation. Rather, because of its being a rediscovery it had the additional certainty of a traditional position. This was an element deriving from the San-lun tradition of the study of the Perfection of Wisdom in the lower Yangtze region, and one that was receiving more and more attention in the middle period of the so-called Northern School. This was established once again—with a profoundly subitist coloration—through the occasion of Shen-hui’s sectarian debate, defined first as the Tathāgata Ch’an of the Laṅkāvatāra Sūtra and later as the Supreme Vehicle of the Diamond Sutra.’ ” The San-lun may indeed have influenced subitist Chan, for its assertion that “overthrowing falsehood is manifesting truth” is congruent with Shenhui, for which see Nagao Gadjin, *The Foundational Standpoint of Mādhyamika Philosophy*, trans. John P. Keenan (Albany: SUNY Press, 1989), 21–22. But nowhere is the clash between “Northern” and “Southern” identified so precisely with the issues of the basic nature of mind as in the above citation from the same Zhangjan.

37. Bernard Faure, *The Will to Orthodoxy: A Critical Genealogy of Northern Chan Buddhism*, trans. Phyllis Brooks (Stanford: Stanford University, 1997), 87.

38. Bernard Faure, *Le volonté d’orthodoxie dans le buddhisme chinois* (Paris: Éditions du CNRS, 1988), 167–78; Faure, *Rhetoric of Immediacy*, 11–78.

39. McRae, “Story of Early Ch’an,” 132: “Shen-hsiu was known for the breadth of his learning: ‘He could converse in the southern dialects of Wu and Chin

cism,” introducing extraneous elements from other Buddhist trajectories into what was to be a most simple teaching: We all are by our buddha-nature already buddhas.⁴⁰ Perhaps here Zhangjan’s description of an early sixth century dispute between Bodhiruci (floruit ca. 508–535) and Ratnamati (fl. ca. 508) prefigured that between Shenhui (684–758) and Shenxiu (606?–706), identifying the central issue of mind and using the labels “Northern” and “Southern” which Shenhui in 703 employed, seemingly out of the blue.⁴¹

The Northern sect of Dilun emphasized that *ālayavijñāna* was the support of consciousness (梨耶真識依持說), which meant that both the karmic obstacle of the passions and the obstacle against true understanding were not easily abandoned, but demanded the intense practice of the bodhisattva path, through all its ten stages, certainly envisioning a “gradual” engagement in a series of meditative practices. Shenhui could read Shenxiu’s metaphor on constantly burning the lamp of wisdom to entail just such a gradual practice. Shenxiu explained the contemplation of the mind using the metaphor of a votive lamp that is never extinguished:

When one’s wisdom is bright and distinct, it is likened to a lamp. For this reason, all those who seek emancipation always consider the body as the lampstand, the mind as the lamp’s dish, and faith as the lamp’s wick. The augmentation of moral discipline is taken as the addition

and was thoroughly versed in the exegesis of the mysterious principle of Lao-tzu and Chuang-tzu, the great truths of the *Book of Documents* and the *Book of Changes*, the sutra and *śāstras* (treatises) of the Three Vehicles, and the rules of the four-part *Vinaya*.’ “

40. Adamek, *Mystique of Transmission*, 171: “Faure argues that prior to Shenhui’s scapegoating of Shenxiu and his heirs a different kind of Chan identity had been emerging, one that was characterized by an eclecticism rather than ‘purists’ sectarianism. Both Faure and McRae have demonstrated that many of the teachings that associate it with the ‘Southern School,’ including its trademark subitism, were anticipated in the far ranging doctrines found in ‘Northern School’ works” (McRae, *Northern School*, 235–253; and “Shenhui and the Teachings of Sudden Enlightenment,” 227–78; Faure, *Le volonté d’orthodoxie*, 167–78, and *Rhetoric of Immediacy*, 11–78).

41. McRae, “Story of Early Ch’an, 135: “But in public lectures held at 730, 731, and 732, Shen-hui vigorously proclaimed his independence from these ideas and attack the legitimacy of the Northern School.... In fact, it was Shen-hui who first coined the term ‘Northern School’ and applied it pejoratively to Shen-hsiu’s student P’u-chi.”

of oil. Wisdom, bright and penetrating, is likened to the lamp's flame. If one constantly burns the lamp of true enlightenment, its illumination will destroy all the darkness of ignorance and stupidity.⁴²

No doubt it was a misreading, as McRae has demonstrated, but it would not be the first time a revered and learned Buddhist master was attacked for what someone saw implied in his teachings. By contrast, the Southern sect of Dilun, as much later did Shenhui, stressed that the basis of the conscious mind was not karmic defilement, growing from the interaction between the preconscious *ālaya* and the defiled thinking of the mind (*kliṣṭa-manas*), which constantly misunderstands and distorts our many sensations.⁴³ Rather, for the both Dilun and Chan Southern sects the basic ground is suchness itself (*tathatā*), the pure mind of a buddha, made present, not by constant movement along the middle path, but by any moment of insight into our true nature and our pure mind.

The Northern sect of Dilun left us no textual records, probably because it was superseded by Xuanzang's "New Translations" of classical Yogācāra,⁴⁴ or perhaps because it simply did not resonate with Chinese readers. The Southern sect of Dilun, however, prospered most likely because its teachings on the suchness of the mind was already popular among Chinese Buddhists. Three texts remain that allow one to examine their teachings. Fashang (法上, 495–580) wrote the *Shi-di lun yi-shu* (十地論義疏), and Huiyuan (慧遠, 523–592) wrote the *Da-cheng yi-zhang* (大乘義章) and the *Shi-ti lun yi-ji* (十地論義記). In these texts there is clear evidence of Tathāgatagarbha thinking interwoven with the classical presentations of the eight consciousnesses of Yogācāra. Fashang writes:

The Dharma body (*dharmakāya*) is the body of reality (*dharmatākāya*).
Mind (*citta*) is the seventh mind (*citta*) [of defiled thinking].

42. From the "Treatise on the Contemplation of Mind" ("Kuan-hsin lun"), which Shenxiu probably wrote during his Yu-ch'uan-ssu. See McRae, "Story of Early Ch'an," 133.

43. Note Dan Lusthaus, *Buddhist Phenomenology: A Philosophical Investigation of Yogācāra Buddhism and the Ch'eng Wei-shih lun* (London: RoutledgeCurzon, 2003), who ably refutes the misconception that Yogācāra is an idealism that negates sense perception.

44. They were called "new translations" because Xuanzang brought them back from India and translated them after the writings of the earlier Dilun and Shelun sects were already widely known.

Perception (*mano*), the sixth [level of thinking (*mano-vijñāna*) is the perceptive consciousness of the five [sense] consciousnesses. Thus the *Laṅkāvatāra-sūtra* says: The mind (*citta*) is the subjectivity of accumulation, perception (*mano*) is all the accumulating, and the appearing in consciousness, of the five [sense] discriminations. The turning away from these seven kinds of consciousness is wisdom. Thus it is said that only wisdom is the basis (唯智依止).⁴⁵

The Yogācāra account is still employed here, but the underlying basis is no longer the seminal *ālaya* consciousness that emerges in the endless delusions of *saṃsāra*, but now only (唯) the basic (依止) wisdom (智) mind of buddha. In his *Da-cheng yi-zhang*, Huiyuan does interpret *ālaya* as the eighth consciousness, apparently reflecting classical Yogācāra:

Ālaya is correctly interpreted as never destroyed (無沒) [even upon awakening], because it is not lost, even though it is involved in *saṃsāra*. Thus it is correct to say that it is a separate eighth consciousness. But it is also said that *tathāgatagarbha* is called this storehouse consciousness. It is called *garbha*, because the buddha dharma, as numerous as the sands of the River Ganges, lie hidden in this consciousness.... It is also called pure consciousness or undefiled consciousness, because its essence is not defiled. Thus the sutras speak of the originally pure mind (自性淨心)....⁴⁶

Huiyuan recognizes *ālaya* as the eighth consciousness, but only because he then equates it with the pure mind of *tathāgatagarbha*. There is here one mind of two aspects, the defiled mind of karmic conditioning, and the pure mind of buddha, apart from any defilement. Huiyuan may appear to approach the position of the Northern sect that *ālaya* is the support of true consciousness, but that is only because he then identifies it with the true mind of suchness. In his *Shi-di lun yi-ji*, Huiyuan clearly holds that *tathatā* is the basis. After identifying *citta* as the seventh consciousness, *mano* as the sixth, and *vijñāna* as the five sense consciousnesses, he writes:

45. *Shi-di lun yi-shu*, T. 85: 763c. The quotation from the *Laṅkāvatāra* is given by Katsumata, *Bukkyō ni okeru shinishikisetsu no kenkyū*, 658: *cittena cīyate karma manasā ca. vicīyate/ vijñānema vijñānati dṛśyam kalpati pañcabhiḥ // 106 //*. Suzuki, *Laṅkāvatāra Sūtra*, 42, translates: “Karma is accumulated by *citta*, reflected upon by *manas*, and rendered conscious by *vijñāna*, and the visible is discriminated by the five [senses].”

46. T. 44:524c.

Because it (i.e., buddha mind) is apart from all these (i.e., *cittamanovijñāna*), it is separate from [them all] (i.e., *citta*, etc.)... We should understand that this is precisely to take *tathatā* consciousness as the essence, for reality pervades the first seven [consciousnesses], and they are joined together with the eighth consciousness.⁴⁷

These disputed ideas in the Dilun school set the stage for the later arguments within Chan about gradual or sudden practice, with “purists” suspecting “gradualists” of really holding to the defiled mind that needs the unremitting effort of continued meditative engagement. The point is that here the dispute lies in whether one has to engage in the many stages of bodhisattva practice, necessitated because the basic nature of mind is karmically defiled, or simply experience a moment of awakened insight, which would uncover the mind of suchness. That has clear parallels to the charges Shenhui laid before Shenxiu, that he was encouraging a “gradual” practice, while all that was needed was a moment of sudden insight. It also would explain why Shenhui talked about a “Northern” school of Chan, when—as McRae so ably demonstrated—it simply did not exist and had no adherents.⁴⁸

The Dilun was absorbed into the Shelun school of Paramārtha, wherein nothing more is heard about the Northern idea of defiled consciousness being the most basic ground of mind. Among other Shelun texts, Paramārtha’s *Fo-xing lun* (佛性論) further asserts these same themes, which seems to parallel the dispute between the vociferous Shenhui and the unresponsive Shenxiu, who never offered any rebuttal to Shenhui. The *Fo-xing lun* presents a threefold explanation of buddha-nature, which contextualizes the later Chan argument, for Shenxiu embraces all three while Shenhui teaches the first and restricts the second as the result of buddha-nature and completely ignores the third:

47. Quoted by Katsumata, *Bukkyō ni okeru shinshikisetsu no kenkyū*, 675. This text is not contained in the *Taishō Tripitaka*. It is found in *Manshi Shūjo* (曼正藏), 71, 3, p. 218.

48. McRae, *Northern School*, 9, writes: “I will follow modern scholarly convention in using ‘Northern School’ to refer to Shen-hsui and his successors.” But it is perhaps better to abandon that convention and simply speak of “Shen-hsui and his successors.” If the school was never identified as “Northern,” even by Shen-hsui and his successors who supposedly adhered to it, it simply did not ever exist.

Next, there are three kinds of buddha-nature, and you should understand the specific meaning of each. These three refer to the three causes and the three kinds of buddha-nature. The three causes are the causes of attaining, of intensified effort, and of perfect fulfillment. The cause of attaining is *tathatā*, which is manifested in the double emptiness [of self and dharmas]. It is because of this [double] emptiness that one attains the aspiration to elicit *bodhi*, intensifies effort, etc., and after [practicing] the path, reaches *dharmakāya*. Thus it is called the cause of attaining.

The cause of intensified effort is that aspiration to elicit *bodhi*, whereby one is enabled to attain the thirty-seven elements [of *bodhi*], the ten *bhūmis*, the ten *pāramitās*, the assisting dharmas and, after [practicing] the path, reach to *dharmakāya*. This is called the cause of intensified effort.

The cause of perfect fulfillment is that intensified effort. Because of intensified effort, one attains the perfect fulfillment which is cause, and the perfect fulfillment which is result. The perfect fulfillment, which is cause, means the practices of merit and wisdom. The perfect fulfillment, which is result, means compassion and merit, which are severed from knowledge. The first of these three causes has the principle of unconditioned *tathatā* (無為如理) as their essence. The last two have conditioned vows as their essence.

The three kinds of buddha-nature mean that there are three natures in the causes that are attained.

The first is abiding in the original nature. The second is eliciting that nature. And the third is realizing that nature.

This means that the abiding in the original nature refers to all worldly beings before [entry into] the path. Eliciting that nature refers to all those who have already elicited the aspiration [to attain *bodhi*] up to those who have finished all their training (*aśaiksa*). The realization of that nature refers to those saints in the stage of no-training.⁴⁹

Thus, buddha-nature is always present but has to be cultivated. The full perfection, which is the result, is described as being cut off from knowledge (智斷). This would seem to mean that, upon the realization of this fulfillment, all phenomenal understanding and awareness is severed, as well as the words and scriptures that support them. Both Shenhui and Shenxiu affirm the first kind of buddha-nature as the mind of suchness, engendering attainments. Shenhui, however, seems to focus on the second kind of buddha-nature only as the result

49. T. 31: 794a.

of seeing into buddha-nature, for it issues in the aspiration (*bodhicitta*) to elicit *bodhi*, just as McRae presents Shenhui:

The major impression one gets from reading Shen-hui's works, of course, is the very concrete sense of his doctrine of sudden enlightenment. This impression holds even in the case of the *Platform Sermon*, in which he hardly uses the term "sudden" (*tun*) at all. It is abundantly clear in this text that Shen-hui's intent was that those listening to him should generate *bodhicitta*, the aspiration to achieve enlightenment, even as they listened to his sermon. He appears to have been a consummate evangelist: although the ethical vows found at the beginning of the text were no doubt part of the conventional liturgical repertoire, Shen-hui must have used them in order to lead his congregation to a more exalted frame of mind in which they would be more open to moments of inspiration. There is not however any real consideration of the practice of meditation after that first generation of *bodhicitta*, a term which he uses in a manner that is virtually tantamount to the final achievement of enlightenment. For example, Shen-hui's *Platform Sermon* contains the following verse in adulation of *bodhicitta*: "Although *bodhicitta* and the ultimate [realization] are no different, of these two [states of] mind, it is difficult to say which is more important. With oneself still unsaved, to first save others—thus do we reverence the initial [achievement of] *bodhicitta*. By this initial *bodhicitta* one becomes a teacher of men and gods, superior to the auditors and solitary Buddhas. With such a *bodhicitta*, one transcends the triple realm, hence this is called the most unsurpassable."⁵⁰

Neglecting to address the causal efficacy of intensified effort to engage in the path practices of the ten stages, and completely ignoring the third meaning of buddha-nature as fulfilled, Shenhui concentrated only on eliciting insight into the fundamental reality of our underlying buddha-nature, for he saw no important difference between initial *bodhicitta* and its full realization. It does make sense to see everything enclosed in an initial moment of insight into our true buddha mind, since that is the base reality of our very being. Furthermore, although *bodhicitta* means and is properly interpreted as an "aspiration for awakening," the term itself can be read as equating the [buddha] mind with wisdom. Shenhui's hearers could have confidence that right here and now they could experience buddhahood, without reference to

50. McRae, "Shen-hui and the Teaching of Sudden Enlightenment," 249.

any further monastic endeavors,⁵¹ since anyone could uncover the true reality of one's own existence. Once that moment of *bodhi* (wisdom) had occurred, the adventitious defilements are seen through and there is then no need for further effort to realize any perfect fulfillment, precisely because any sudden seeing into one's basic buddha-nature ought to be quite sufficient. One can then just let thoughts arise as they will, seeing into their unreality. There is no need to "polish" the mind as if it were really a dirty mirror,⁵² for once one sees through the defilements, they simply have no power to block the effulgence of the buddha mind. If the defiled aspects of mind simply are epiphenomenal, then any sudden moment of insight can uncover what does exist, the buddha mind, even if thereafter one is to maintain constancy in practice, lest by inattentiveness the clouds of illusion again cover over the sun of enlightenment.⁵³

McRae has succeeded brilliantly in showing that Shenhui's attack has no counterpoint in anything Shenxiu actually taught. Shenxiu continued to teach the iconoclastically traditional Chan path, leading from the initial aspiration for enlightenment (*bodhicitta*) toward a fullness

51. *Ibid.*, 254: "To go one step further, it may well be the case that Shenhui emphasized the doctrine of the equivalence of the 'three learnings' of morality, meditation, and wisdom precisely because it undercut the rationale for extended meditation practice and, by implication, the traditional monastic regimen of self-control and spiritual cultivation. Certainly the caricatures of Northern school monks in Shen-hui's texts and their emphasis on the primacy of meditation practice imply that hard work was not required, only the inspiration that Shen-hui set out to provide. Although Shen-hui's life work was carried out on the ordination platform, his teachings lightened the burden of being a Buddhist monk and removed the distinction between monks and laymen, thereby aiding the dissemination of Ch'an among the unordained. In this sense there is a direct continuity between Shen-hui's teachings and the *Platform Sūtra*, as well as one of the keys to the subsequent popularity of Chinese Ch'an."

52. *Daodejing* 10 recommends mirror polishing: "Can you clean and polish the mysterious mirror? This is called the power of the mystery (滌除玄覽，能無疵乎？... 是謂玄德).

53. McRae, *Northern School*, 209: "These themes, then, will form the nucleus of our discussion of Northern School doctrine: the positing of defiled impure aspects of mind, dedication to the penetration of the nonexistence or non-substantiality of the defiled mind and its illusions, the emphasis on constancy of practice, and the recognition of the suddenness of enlightenment."

of constant awareness. So what differentiates Shenhui is not what he taught, but what he did not teach, since he omitted any effort beyond that needed immediately to see into one's true nature, available to all simply because it is the true nature of all sentient beings. If we can employ Paramārtha's treatise on buddha-nature to contextualize later analogous Chan developments, Shenhui focused singly on the occurrence of *bodhicitta* as the one necessary experience for enlightenment.

Chan—like all traditions that embrace buddha-nature as our truly real reality—has had within it the logic to empty even its own teachings. No matter how voluminous its literary output, it could always claim to be beyond words and not reliant on scriptures.⁵⁴ And I think they have a point, since we daily see how scripted words can mislead practitioners. Nāgārjuna had emptied all, even Buddhist, views, then to reclaim them as true and efficacious conventional teachings. Shenxiu and his predecessors and followers followed this advice in practice, supporting Chan practice through copious rituals and buttocks-toughening meditative sitting. However, the logic of buddha-nature could at any moment undercut those path practices, precisely because at every moment buddha-nature is always our true reality and needs at any moment only to be discovered, i.e., to be uncovered. D. T. Suzuki appealed to Huineng and Shenhui and thus also rejected any “mirror-polishing” as unneeded, since the moment of *satori* was beyond Buddhism itself. He thought Shenhui wrote the *Platform Sutra* and that his mind verse replaces Shenxiu's mind verse.⁵⁵

54. *Daodejing* 2: “Therefore the abode of the sage lies in the deeds of nonaction and practices a teaching without words (是以聖人處無為之事，行不言之教).”

55. McRae, “Yanagida Seizan's Landmark Works on Chinese Ch'an,” 70: Yanagida infers that the original compiler was probably the Oxhead school monk Wu-hsing Fa-hai, a disciple of Ho-lin Hsuan-su. And 95: “Yanagida's fundamental appreciation of the origins and importance of the Platform Sutra has not changed since his *Historical Works*: ‘The new development in Ch'an literature that began with Shen-hui achieved a certain completion in the Platform Sutra. Rather than being the recorded sayings of the historical individual known as the Sixth Patriarch, this text was the creation of a group of disciples who attributed it to the name of the Sixth Patriarch Hui-neng, who had been celebrated by Shen-hui as the founder of the sudden teaching of the Southern School. Developed in layers by Shen-hui and his followers, this was the final achievement of the Southern School movement. The explanation

Suzuki-Zen was the religion-less (Buddhism-less) dynamic within all religions, always available to those most able to see beyond the dualities of subject and object. But Chan/Zen, having listened to both Shenhui and in modern days to Suzuki, then simply continued on the path of meditative practice. It still teaches its apophatic practice, engaging in ritual and rejoicing in the conundrums, so that its “encounter dialogues” became a scripted foundation beyond the scriptures, always to be relived in the give-and-take of the Dharma hall.

John McRae identifies the Oxhead school as offering the counter to Shenhui’s complaint. It did this in its *Jueguan lun*, offering a threefold approach to emptiness that resembles the classical Yogācāra theme of three patterns of consciousness. McRae writes:

We should pay attention to the threefold structure of this passage [from *Jueguan lun* of the Oxhead school]. In contrast to Shenhui’s simple, dualistic value system of gradual versus sudden, here there is a threefold pattern of beginning question, intermediate hesitation, and final achievement. A close examination of Oxhead school writings suggest that their teachings were frequently written using a threefold logical format, which resembles Zhiyi’s scheme of the three truths of absolute, relative, and middle. It is also structurally similar to Hegel’s theses-antithesis-synthesis pattern, but in this case the second element achieves its impact by the application of the fundamental Mahāyāna concept of *śūnyatā*, or emptiness. Indeed, the same tripartite structure is apparent in the thought of a least one important Indian Mādhyamika philosopher (Bhāvaviveka). That is, an expression of Buddhism is made in the first element, the terms of this expression are erased in the second element, and the understanding of Buddhism is thereby elevated to a new level of profundity in the third element. The significance of this pattern will only become clear when we examine the greatest masterpiece of early Chinese Chan Buddhism, the *Platform Sūtra*.⁵⁶

That same threefold pattern is implicit in Nāgārjuna’s famous verse from chapter 24:9 of his *Stanzas*, and the Yogācāra philosophers explicated its importance by describing the development of an initial

of the Platform Sutra is the first step in the foundational work of elucidating the formation of early Ch’an and the basis of Chinese Buddhism.’ ” *Recorded Sayings*, i.e., “Goroku no rekishi—Zen bunken no seiritsushi-teki kenkyū [The History of Recorded Sayings—A Study of the Historical Formation of Ch’an Literature],” in *Tōhō gakuho* (Kyoto) 57 (March 1985): 211–663; here 404.

56. McRae, *Seeing through Zen*, 60.

pattern of attachment to imagined realities (*parikalpita*). But by engagement in the path one can turn that pattern on its head and realize a pattern of fullness (*pariṇiṣpanna*), emptying anything imagined to be really real. However, in classical Yogācāra both these patterns of conscious life rely on the basic nature of consciousness in its multi-level structure and in all its activities dependent on other factors, whether it be the interplay between the various modalities of defiled consciousness or simply in the varied insight into whatever images emerge from the context of the engaged practitioner. The basic pattern is called “other-dependent” (*paratantra*), because the mind itself is the prime instance of dependent arising. Still, once one has seen into the fullness of emptiness, she moves back into the conventional world, no longer entranced by images or ideas, but able wisely to speak a conventional truth that is truly efficacious in leading people to the path of awakening. The Oxhead threefold pattern is analogous, except its predecessors are not merely Tiantai Zhiyi or the Mādhyamika Bhāvaviveka, but the entire pantheon of Yogācāra philosophers from classical times: Maitreya, Asaṅga, Vasubandhu, Sthiramati, Āsvabhāva, Dharmapāla, Bandhuprabha.

Yanagida and McRae interpret the *Platform Sutra* in similar fashion: not championing Shenhui, but offering complementary “mind verses” to coax a harmony between the contending factions that emerged from Shenhui. The history of this text is complicated, showing influences from the Oxhead school of Chan, and from “Northern” texts,⁵⁷ finally resolving “the crisis fomented by Shenhui.”⁵⁸ The outcome of the threefold pattern in interpreting the *Platform Sutra* moves from a formal propositional expression of the highest truth, to its demolition by the critique of emptiness, to wind up with a “remainder” of what

57. McRae, “Story of Early Ch’an,” 137.

58. Ibid. The *Platform Sutra* and its history are more complex. “The crisis fomented by Shen-hui was resolved by the Oxhead school in the *Platform Sūtra*. The Oxhead school gets its peculiar name from its origins at Mount Oxhead in southeastern China; all its known members were from the South, and they operated chiefly in a small area of modern Kiangsu. Rather than a close-knit community of master and students training together, the Oxhead school appears to have been an abstract religious ideal to which different individuals subscribed. One of its doctrinal missions was to diffuse the factional rivalry created by Shen-hui’s campaign. Thus we read that the Oxford school considered itself ‘the separate teaching outside of the two schools.’ “

first had been stated formally.⁵⁹ “The basic meaning of the first proposition still remains, rather like a shadow whose sharp outlines have been removed by the impact of the second proposition.”⁶⁰

In the Yogācāra configuration, by contrast, the recovery of a conventional truth, washed by emptiness, champions a more light-filled enunciation of a dependently arisen truth that is truly true and efficaciously potent, not shadowed by being emptied but more robust by being dependently arisen. The similarities and parallels emerge, I think, because the issues remain similar. Once Chan had moved beyond Shenhui’s complaint, in later Chinese Chan, seeing into reality was creatively remembered in the many examples of “encounter dialogue,” meant to be orally experienced in the concrete give-and-take of living language. More perhaps than any other tradition, Chan has relied on oral transmission,⁶¹ handing down generation to generation para-

59. For a contrasting understanding, see Nagao Gadjin, “What Remains’ in Śūnyatā: A Yogācāra Interpretation of Emptiness,” in *Mahāyāna Buddhist Meditation: Theory and Practice*, ed. Minoru Kiyota (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1978), 66–82.

60. McRae, *Seeing through Zen*, 65: “If we compare this to the structure of the Oxhead school’s depiction of the interchange between professor and enlightenment and the student conditionality, the parallel is clear: the *Platform Sūtra* uses the same threefold structure found in Oxhead school thought. The constant teaching he first posited as the highest possible expression of the Buddhist teaching *in formal terms*, after which Huineng’s verse(s) apply the rhetoric of emptiness to undercut the substantiality of the terms of that formulation. However, the basic meaning of the first proposition still remains, rather like a shadow whose sharp outlines have been removed by the impact of the second proposition. The third and final proposition thus include both the assumption of the first and the erasure of the second, now shorn of its over-sharp outline. In the *Platform Sūtra* this third proposition is implicit in the balance of the text, which contains the expression of the ultimate teaching of Buddhism....”

61. This is especially characteristic of Shenhui, who spoke from public spaces. McRae, “Shen-hui and the Teaching of Sudden Enlightenment,” 253: “In a more immediate sense, though, Shen-hui’s single-minded emphasis on sudden enlightenment represented a qualitative change from the positions of earlier Northern school texts. This is true not because his message differed in any major way, but rather because of his chosen medium. The central thread that unites all of Shen-hui’s ideas and activities was his vocation of lecturing from the ordination platform, and it is thoroughly understandable that his chosen

digms through an “informally controlled oral tradition” that can focus on the heart of the matter while allowing for a wide field of flexibility in the particulars, even to the point of pulling hitherto obscure figures like Huineng from remembered times to serve as the mouthpiece for what is really important.⁶² No matter what doctrines lie unquestioned among Chan practitioners, the focus remains on the experiences of teacher and student as they wrestle with apophatic and unsolvable riddles, until they come to realize that answers lie within their own everyday minds.

McRae is on target when he points out that the romantic picture of Chan masters as “string of pearly” paragons does not support the everyday practice of ordinary people who are not paragons of anything in particular. Neither do they shine any light on the historical influences that ramified into Chan from other Mahāyāna traditions, or even from Daoism. Far better are understandings of more historical rigor, for such critiques issue from an everyday appreciation of the actual development of Chan tradition. One does have to give up rosy images that place masters far above the common herd, appreciating their actual lives and accomplishments in a way that makes them once again accessible. Criticism well carried out does no more than strengthen the tradition by recognizing it as a tradition, characterized by everything human that factored into its development. The answer to criticism that is not well carried out is not a retreat into naiveté, but more and better critical history.

Without reliance on recorded scriptures, Chan is perhaps more vulnerable to criticism precisely because its claims to an ineffable truth are not subject to any criticism, moving as it does beyond documentary evidence to function within an apophatic discourse supported by oral

role of inspiring conversion to the Buddhist spiritual quest was combined with an overriding concern with the initial moment of religious inspiration. To put it in the simplest of terms, there is an inextricable relationship between Shen-hui’s emphasis on sudden enlightenment and his proselytic, evangelical role, so much so that it is impossible to tell which was cause and which was effect. Shen-hui espoused the doctrine of sudden enlightenment because he taught from the ordination platform, and he taught from the ordination platform because he espoused the doctrine of sudden enlightenment.” Shenhui would then parallel Billy Graham or George Whitfield.

62. Kenneth E. Bailey, “Informal Controlled Oral Tradition and the Synoptic Gospels,” *Themelios* 20, no. 2 (January 1995): 7.

interchange and silent sitting. Faced with critiques about the historical accuracy of the New Testament gospels, Christian scholars have faced similar criticisms, and have directed their attention to the structure and function of oral traditions, remembered across generations, but enriched by dramatic tropes and theological concerns.⁶³ The task for Christian exegetes has been to bridge the forty years between the writing of the first gospel and the events in the life of Jesus they report. They do so by acknowledging the common memories of gospel community members who, as they heard or read the gospels, would easily have remembered what actually had happened, even as they grew in their appreciation for its theological meanings.

Something much similar happened, I think, in the *Platform Sutra*. Some time after Shenhui, practitioners recalled his challenge to the monastic practice of the tradition, simply because its basic issue had long been, and remains, the central conundrum for any community that relies on silent speech and teaches that we are all already enlightened.⁶⁴ If history records our struggle for the survival of ourselves, it can never get to the heart of the matter, which is not ourselves. It is little wonder then that Chan, always dedicated to the heart of the matter, weaves its own theological past with scant attention to historical accuracy. In a rather amazing account from Shenhui's *Treatise on the True Principle, Compiled and Explained by the Śramana Ta-chao and the Layman Hui-kuang*, a layman asks the Chan teacher to tell him just what are the essentials of the teaching, speaking directly without using expedient means. "Do not forsake the common sort [of ignorant person such as myself], and please have no secrets." The master welcomes the layman's quest, remarking that "*In my forty-five years of life and over twenty years as a monk, never has anyone asked me about this meaning (i.e., about the ultimate message of Buddhism). What problems do you have? What doubts can I settle? Ask directly and I will explain directly—do not bother with elaborate speech.*" The above italics are placed by John McRae to highlight the story's assertion that no one had hitherto ever asked that

63. James D. G. Dunn, *The Oral Gospel Tradition* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2013).

64. The same task is presented in later New Testament writings like Colossians and Ephesians which teach that we have already risen with Christ, already have experienced his resurrection. Ephesians 4:16 includes a verse from a baptismal liturgy that equates resurrection with awakening, available to all: "Sleeper, awaken! Rise from the dead, and Christ will enlighten you."

most basic question. For forty years the master had never been asked the most basic of questions! The answer, though, is quite traditional, such as Shenxiu or any Chan master might give:

You should not view a single dharma, and neither should you have any seeking. You should not realize a single dharma, and neither should you have any subsequent [attainment]. You should not become enlightened to a single dharma, and neither is there any enlightenment (*tao*) that can be cultivated. This is bodhi.⁶⁵

One should neither seek any Dharma teaching nor bother with any further cultivation. In such a situation, certainly no one who seeks the essential path of enlightenment has any interest in uncovering the historical status of the Dharma teacher or her teaching.

Nevertheless, no matter the advice to abstain from seeking, the unquestioned tradition itself becomes an obstacle to understanding, precisely because its romantic presentation begins to float high above the dependently arisen world we all inhabit. If we make any tradition so romantically aloof, or supernaturalize it in a pretend aura of attributed holiness, we remove it even farther from the concrete experience of men and women. This is why scholars like John McRae, and Bernard Faure, and Robert Sharf raise the troubling historical questions. It is also why John Dominic Crossan, John P. Meier, and James D. G. Dunn raise their questions about the historical Jesus. I think their questioning is to be warmly welcomed, because, although the history recovered turns out to be something of a skeleton history, it also uncovers the spiritual concerns that underlie all the received accounts.⁶⁶ In an era that questions all religious and spiritual narratives, it is a blessing to be able to locate Chan (or any other tradition) in its actual human history, for the efforts to do so bring Chan more viscerally into our human history, which is the only history we have.⁶⁷

65. McRae, "Shen-hui and the Teaching of Sudden Enlightenment," 241.

66. McRae, *Seeing through Zen*, 6: "The act of transmission thus involves not the bestowing of some 'thing' from one master to the next, but the recognition of shared spiritual maturity. It is a cosmic dance involving a special set of partners, a relationship of encounter, a meeting at the deepest spiritual level."

67. We do not need to mediate between traditional narratives and critical historical studies, as does Steven Heine, *Zen Skin, Zen Marrow: Will the Real Zen Please Stand Up* (Oxford: Oxford University, 2008). Rather we need to embrace critical approaches, and where they wander into positivist categories, do a yet more critical analysis. Often in purely debunking critiques, the underlying issue is not the narrative studied but the historiographical assumptions entertained.