

Learning Zen History from John McRae

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John McRae occupies an important position in the early history of the modern study of Zen Buddhism. His groundbreaking book, *The Northern School and the Formation of Early Ch'an Buddhism*, is steadfast in its determination to “discriminate between legend and history” so that an accurate understanding of the early phases of Zen history could be gleaned.¹ Among those interested in this history at the time, few had the historical sophistication and linguistic skills to carry this difficult task forward at this level of success. Following in the legacy created by Philip Yampolsky’s critical reading of the Dunhuang manuscripts in his study of the *Platform Sutra of the Sixth Patriarch*, McRae realized that modern Japanese Zen studies had already begun to reinterpret the tradition in a way that used the evidence provided in classical Zen texts to probe beneath the mythical histories that they had produced. On the good advice of Stanley Weinstein, his mentor at Yale, McRae went to Japan to study with Yanagida Seizan, at that point the leading Zen scholar examining the newly available Dunhuang manuscripts. The effects of this study on McRae helped all of us turn a decisive corner in the study of the history of Zen Buddhism.

How can we best understand the difference between the early Chan histories of their tradition, and our subsequent history of those histories? Is Chan history really history, or something else altogether? In his early work, McRae used the term “pseudohistory” in referring to these classical texts, although he dropped that way of referring to these texts over time. Early Chan historical texts are indeed histories, but histories written for purposes quite other than our own. In this sense, we would be mistaken to distinguish between our “good” or

1. John R. McRae, *The Northern School and the Formation of Early Ch'an Buddhism* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1985).

“accurate” histories, and the historically naïve or “inaccurate” Chan histories, simply because “accuracy” wasn’t the driving point of the texts being composed. Very different purposes were being served in their writing, purposes that were much larger in scope—establishing and coalescing a tradition, creating a sustainable lineage of spiritual endeavor. Their success in this undertaking is Zen as we understand it today, a powerful tradition holding over a millennium of influence over East Asia and now the entire world.

John McRae had the subtlety and insight to recognize that difference, and to raise the stakes in our scholarly effort to understand its inner dynamics. Early Chan mythmaking is not, of course, the earliest layer of human mythmaking. Much earlier Chinese texts and those from other cultures hold that honor. In consequence of that, Chan mythmaking was much more intentional, much more self-conscious than the somewhat spontaneous emergence of early mythic history. Chan writers were well aware of the point of their endeavor. They sought to create a tradition that could compete in the cultural battles that raged through medieval China, and their success is itself legendary. No one has attained greater clarity about this achievement than McRae. Indeed, first on the list of the tongue-in-cheek “McRae’s Rules of Zen Studies” (“It’s not true, and therefore it’s more important”), he writes: “The mythopoetic creation of Zen literature implies the religious imagination of the Chinese people, a phenomenon of vast scale and deep significance.”²

The historian’s effort to probe beneath mythical history to look directly at the process entailed in its creation isn’t always appreciated, however. New converts to Zen meditation in the West were critical of the historian’s tendency to be distant and seemingly dismissive of the brilliant legends that the tradition offered. McRae alludes to this critique in *Seeing through Zen* when in the preface he poses the relevant question: “Scholars, students, and general studies readers constitute a natural audience for this book. Why should religious practitioners read it?”³ His straightforward answer comes to this: that “If Buddhist spiritual practice aims at seeing things as they are” then a full “archaeological” digging through the complex layers of the massive Zen

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

3. *Ibid.*, xii.

tradition should be welcomed, indeed, eagerly so. How can concern for the truth be antithetical to spiritual practice?

McRae was able to see clearly that the act of demythologizing Chan mythical history need not have the effect of undermining its spiritual impact, even if it would alter that impact by raising the level of sophistication under which it would be comprehended. The thoughtful historian, like McRae, holds the object of study in the highest regard, indeed seeking to unearth layers of meaning that were previously only latent there. Taking care not to assume or allow that one's work would devalue or deplete the tradition, but rather bring it to a higher level of self-consciousness—that is crucial to responsible historical study. “Dismissive misapprehension,” as McRae called it, is seriously to be avoided.⁴

The subtlety of McRae's understanding of this point can be seen in his brilliant book title, *Seeing through Zen*. Initially we can understand that you “see through” a surface understanding to something deeper and more important; you see through as façade that prevents depth of vision. In one sense, early Chan mythical histories constituted just such a façade *for us* as modern readers and converts. If we took them at face value, our understanding would inevitably be naïve and shallow. McRae's work has helped us see the actual historical mechanisms that shaped this great tradition. But “seeing through” goes beyond that initial sense, and McRae alerts us to this fact in calling it “multivalent.”⁵ Careful, thoughtful study and/or practice of Zen enables us to see through it in the sense that Zen opens our awareness and understanding of the world. Seeing through the lens of Zen opens our vision of human capability, of what it means to be human. In that sense, “seeing through Zen” means tapping into the power and insight of this tradition to expand and deepen our vision.

This multivalence in all of our acts of “seeing through” highlights the extent to which creative imagination is entailed in historical study. McRae's very first sentence in *Seeing through Zen* is: “This book is intended for those who wish to engage actively in the critical imagination of medieval Chinese Chan, or Zen, Buddhism.”⁶ Studying Zen historically is not passive learning but instead active, critical, and

4. *Ibid.*, xx.

5. *Ibid.*, xv.

6. *Ibid.*, xi.

imaginative. It changes things. Therefore McRae goes on to write: “In other words, the primary goal of this book is not to present any single master narrative of Chinese Chan, but to change how we all think about the subject.”⁷ Following his lead on this, we realize that the objects of historical investigation are not static; they are open to ongoing insight. Why would that be so? How could anything done in the past change? Once an accurate and comprehensive understanding of anything historical has been attained, what could possibly change? What could and will change is the perspective from which something has been understood and because of that the present and future meaning of that historical phenomenon. Our acts of historical study are themselves historical, rather than timeless. They arise out of and serve particular contexts of meaning that shift as times moves on. The present vantage point from which both past and future are interpreted is itself another particular moment in the flow of history, a moment that will at some point be subsumed in subsequent events of understanding. The past that the historian studies, therefore, is not a static object of investigation, but an inexhaustible and always changing source of possibilities. Recognizing this, we elevate the level of our understanding and bring greater sophistication to our engagement in study.

The contemporary form of Zen studies that was pioneered by John McRae and others reveals a wonderful irony in the origins of Chan. The most visible sign of this irony is that the Buddhist emphasis on impermanence and dependent arising that was brought further to life by the great Chan masters was at the same time suppressed in order to valorize a static conception of enlightenment. Tracing Chan enlightenment back through the patriarchs to the Buddha himself, the tradition encouraged the assumption that in fact no cultural change at all had taken place over those many centuries or in the movement between cultures. Harboring the illusion that authenticity required sameness and that change implied decline, Chan teachers and writers would not be able to develop that crucial dimension of Buddhist insight.

Realizing this, and preferring not to repeat a similar inability, contemporary historical study presents us with the possibility of recognizing that it isn't simply that we *have* a history, but rather that we *are* historical. That means that, as Buddhists had claimed, we lack a fixed nature and that our understanding of things arises dependent

7. Ibid., xi.

on numerous shifting factors which really do change over time. This insight for self-understanding brings us back finally to our capacity to see ourselves and the world through a Zen sense of flexibility and exhilaration. It is surely no accident that one version of this kind of “seeing” was initiated by a Buddhist scholar named McRae who maintained an ecstatic Zen-like sense of humor all the way to the end of life.

