

Zen

Ch'an Buddhism

The term *ch'an* (Japanese *zen*) derives from the Sanskrit *dhyāna*, which is used in Indian Buddhist theory to designate the attainment of a deep state of peace by the means of calm meditation. The term comes to refer to one of the important schools of East Asian Buddhism.

Ch'an tradition looks to the legendary figure of the Indian monk Bodhidharma, who is said to have come east in the fifth or sixth century CE, as its first 'patriarch', but it is likely that the roots of Ch'an lie further back in Chinese Buddhist history with the interest shown in meditation practice by such figures as Tao-an (312–85), Hui-yüan (334–416), and Tao-sheng (360–434).

Ch'an tradition has it that, beginning with Bodhidharma, the lineage of teaching and the title of 'patriarch' passed from master to pupil. The transmission to the sixth patriarch, however, became the object of dispute. Originally it was assumed to have passed to Shen-hsiu (600–706), but in 734 this succession was challenged by a southern monk named Shen-hui (670–762), who claimed that in fact Hui-neng (638–713) had been the true sixth patriarch.

Shen-hui and his 'southern' school of Ch'an were the effective winners of the dispute, with Hui-neng now looked upon as a second founder of Ch'an.

Shen-hui was an advocate of the doctrine of 'sudden awakening', and one of the things that he charged Shen-hsiu with was teaching a doctrine of 'gradual awakening'.

This dispute over whether awakening should be regarded as a gradual process or a sudden event was not confined to Ch'an circles, but was a question that preoccupied Chinese Buddhism from an early date.

To some extent the problem reflects the old Abhidharma discussion over the question of whether, at the time of awakening, the four noble truths are seen gradually (as the Sarvāstivādins argued) or in a single instant (as the Theravādins, amongst others, argued): ultimate truth is not something one can see part of; one either sees it complete, or not at all. Yet the account of the bodhisattva path the Chinese inherited from India details various stages with definite attainments and points of no return.

After Shen-hui, Ch'an became very much associated with a sudden awakening view.

Bodhidharma is said to have emphasized the teachings of the *Lankāvatāra Sūtra*, and the theoretical basis of Ch'an centres on the notions of the *tathāgatagarbha* and 'emptiness' as pointing beyond all conceptual forms of thought. Our innermost nature is simply the Buddha-nature (*fo-hsing*) which is to be realized in a direct and sudden experience of inner awakening (*wu/satori*).

Ch'an tradition has a marked tendency to be critical of conventional theory and discursive philosophy, which it sees as cluttering the mind and creating obstacles to direct experience. Emphasis is put on just sitting in meditation (*tso ch'an/zazen*), the carrying out of ordinary routine tasks and the all-important instruction of the Ch'an master.

Ch'an's own considerable literary and intellectual tradition centres on the stories of the sayings and deeds of these Ch'an masters, who may be portrayed as behaving in unexpected and spontaneous ways and responding to questions with apparent non-sequiturs and riddles (*kung-an/kōan*) in order to jolt their pupils from their habitual patterns of thought and prompt in them an awakening experience. An example follows:

Question: 'If a man has his head shaved, wears a monk's robe, and takes the shelter Buddha gives, why then should he not be recognized as one who is aware of Buddha?' Master: 'It is not as good to have something as to have nothing' (Chang, *Original Teachings of Ch'an Buddhism*, 276).

Although as many as five different Ch'an schools had emerged by the ninth century, only two of these remained important after the government suppression of Buddhist monasticism in 842–5: the Lin Chi (Japanese Rinzai) and Ts'ao Tung (Japanese Sōtō).

The former placed particular emphasis on the paradoxical riddle of the *kung-an*, and the master's bizarre behaviour; the latter placed more emphasis on formal sitting meditation; in Japan it is associated with the important figure of Dōgen (1200–53).

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