

John R. McRae

SEEING

THROUGH

ZEN

*Encounter, Transformation, and Genealogy
in Chinese Chan Buddhism*

A

Philip E. Lilienthal



BOOK

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Seeing through Zen

Encounter, Transformation, and Genealogy in Chinese Chan
Buddhism

John R. McRae

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Dedicated to YANAGIDA Seizan, with inexpressible gratitude

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Preface

This book is intended for those who wish to engage actively in the critical imagination of medieval Chinese Chan, or Zen, Buddhism. The interpretations presented in the following pages represent my best and most cherished insights into this important religious tradition, and I look forward to their critical appraisal and use by general readers, students, and colleagues. More important than the specific content presented here, though, are the styles of analysis undertaken and the types of human processes described. 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.

I expect the readership of this book to include Zen and other Buddhist practitioners; students and scholars of Chinese religions, Buddhist studies, and related fields; and a general audience interested in Asian religions and human culture. General readers will find here sufficient basis for a far-reaching critique of how Zen is perceived in contemporary international culture. In addition, my analysis of Chinese Chan religious practice as fundamentally genealogical should provide a new point of comparison for the analysis of modern and contemporary developments in Zen, particularly those occurring in North America and Europe. That is, if Chan practice was originally genealogical—which I mean patriarchal, generational, and relational—in ways that fit so well with medieval Chinese society, how will it be (or, how is it being) transformed as it spreads throughout the globe in the twenty-first century (and as it did in the twentieth)? In other words, how is Zen changing, and how will it change, as it grows and spreads within the context of globalization and Westernization?

Scholars, students, and general readers constitute a natural audience for this book. Why should religious practitioners read it? If Buddhist spiritual practice aims at seeing things as they are, then getting past the foolish over-simplifications and confusing obfuscations that surround most interpretations of Zen should be an important part of the process. That is the short answer. A more specific answer requires a bit of explanation.

The first time I lectured on Chinese Chan to a community of practitioners was in 1987 for the Summer Seminar on the Sutras, held in Jemez Springs, New Mexico, at Bodhi Mandala, which functions within the teaching organization of the Rinzai master Joshu Sasaki Roshi. Among those attending was an elderly American Zen monk, who objected strenuously to my instruction, asking repeatedly, “What good is any of this for my practice?” The organizers of the week-long workshop were somewhat embarrassed by his aggressive attitude, pointing out that, as a former lightweight boxer, he may have taken more than one punch too many. For my own part, I enjoyed the challenge which forced me to confront the question head-on in a way that never would have happened in university lecturing. Subsequently, I have honed my response (you are welcome to consider it a defensive reaction, if you wish!) in seminars and workshops at Dai Bosatsu in upstate New York under the direction of another Rinzai teacher, Eido Shimano Roshi; the Zen Center of Los Angeles, a Soto Zen institution founded by the late Taizan Maezumi Roshi; Zen Mountain Monastery at Mt. Tremper, New York, led by John Daido Looi Roshi, a student of Maezumi’s; the San Francisco Zen Center, which was founded by Shunryu Suzuki Roshi; the Mount Equity Zen Center, directed by Dharma En Bennage Sensei; Zen Mountain Center, directed by Tenshin Fletcher Sensei, a successor of Maezumi; and Dharma Rain and the Zen Community of Oregon in Portland, directed by Kyogen and

Gyokuko Carlson and Chozen and Hogen Bays, respectively. In addition to these American Zen centers, on two separate occasions, I have also taught a two-week intensive class at Foguang Shan, Kaohsiung, Taiwan; on the first occasion (in 1992) the participants were mostly young Taiwanese Buddhist nuns, while on the second (in 2002) the class was composed of Southeast Asian Chinese nuns and monks from Africa, India (a native of Nālandā!), and the United States. These chapters were first prepared for presentation at Templo Zen Luz Serena in Valencia, Spain, under the direction of Dokuo ō Villalba Sensei. This book has benefited in profound ways from interaction with the participants in all these different practice settings, and I am deeply grateful for their attention, questions, and suggestions.

There is nothing in this book that will aid one's religious practice directly. I am not a Zen master, nor even a meditation instructor, and this is not a do-it-yourself manual. To use a cooking analogy, I am not a Julia Child teaching you how to concoct your life in Zen. Instead, I am more the art critic who evaluates her teaching methods and dramatic performance, or even the chemist who analyzes the dynamic evolution of her recipes as they make their pilgrimage from pan to plate. Art critics are not necessarily good performers themselves, and chemists are not necessarily gourmet cooks. Although I am indeed a Buddhist (in autobiographical blurbs I usually include a line about being "a practitioner of long standing but short attention span"), and even though my religious identity as a youthfully convert to Buddhism allows for a certain empathy with my subject matter, I am a scholar and not a guru. As a professor in aggressively secular state universities over the years, I have learned to keep anything resembling preaching out of my classroom presentations, and the same holds true here. I am not aiming to convert you, unless by that is meant an intellectual transformation that may penetrate the very core of your being.

This volume is resolutely about Zen, not about how to practice Zen. It thus differs from the vast majority of books on Zen in English in that it does not assume the reader to be a potential Zen practitioner. Indeed, even the most dedicated practitioners will benefit by stepping outside their chosen tradition for the endeavor of its reading. I believe our roles as scholars and readers involve the active and critical imagination of the medieval evolution of Chinese Chan Buddhism. By active, I mean that we should constantly work to envision how Chan emerged in the medieval Chinese social and intellectual context; by critical, I mean that we should also work to consider all the available evidence from all possible angles, testing hypotheses and evaluating objections.

In many ways, my training in this process began with my graduate studies under Professor Stanley Weinstein, to whom I am dedicating my second research volume on eighth-century Chan Buddhism, provisionally entitled *Zen Evangelist: Shenhui (684–758), Sudden Enlightenment, and the Southern School of Chinese Chan Buddhism* (forthcoming from the University of Hawai'i Press, under the auspices of the Kuroda Institute). The debt I owe Professor Weinstein, who has dedicated his career to the training of the finest cohort of scholars in American Buddhist studies, is incalculable.

The present volume is in effect my attempt to emulate the creative work of YANAGIDA Seizaemon 柳田聖山, with whom I had the privilege to study while writing my dissertation. As the greatest scholar of Chinese Chan Buddhism of the twentieth century, Professor Yanagida has brought to his writing both magisterial knowledge and profound sensitivity. Although my tutelage under Professor Yanagida came many years before this book was conceived, I have fond memories of sitting with him in his study, accepting bowls of delicious *matcha* tea, and discussing the contents of Chinese Chan texts. Even when I groped for ordinary Japanese vocabulary in our conversations, and even when I butchered the rules of classical Chinese grammar in our readings, his sympathetic patience was inexhaustible. I will admit, however, that for the weekly seminars on Chinese Chan texts at Hanazono College,

Rinzai Zen institution, it would have been copacetic had the college marching band not chosen the very same time to practice its John Philip Sousa renditions!)

As the vanguard of a new wave of Japanese scholarship that revolutionized our understanding of Chan through analysis of handwritten manuscripts from the Dunhuang cave in Chinese Central Asia, Professor Yanagida has consistently demonstrated an interpretive brilliance that has energized an entire generation of Western students. If I have inherited even a small part of his legacy, I hope that the playful humanism of his example shines through these pages. I dedicate this book to Professor Yanagida with a depth of gratitude I can only hint at in words.

Thanks are due to many others as well, of course. As mentioned above, these chapters were first prepared for presentation in Spanish translation at Templo Zen Luz Serena, directed by Dokushō Villalba Sensei, in Valencia, Spain, June 19–21, 1999. The invitation was sponsored by the Japanese Rinzai Zen School, and the initial translations were prepared by Ms. Lucía Huélamo and Rev. Aigüerres Castro, who also served as cotranslators for the oral presentations. My profound thanks are due to Villalba Sensei, Rev. Castro, and Ms. Huélamo, as well as all the members of Luz Serena, who made my visit there so enjoyable and productive. Subsequently, the first chapter was presented in Chinese at the Chung-Hwa Institute of Buddhist Studies. The Chinese translation, which was prepared by KUAN Tse-fu [Guan Zefu] 關則富, was published in Chinese as “Shenshi chuancheng—chenshu Chanzong ling yizhong fangshi” 審視傳承—陳述禪宗的另I種方式. I would like to express my deep gratitude to Ven. Sheng-yen 張聖嚴, as well as to Professor LI Chih-fu 李志夫, director of the Institute, and Secretary CHEN Hsiu-lan 陳秀蘭 and the Institute staff for their kind assistance during my research stay in Taiwan from December 1998 to August 1999. Also, part of chapter 4 has already appeared in print as “The Antecedents of Encounter Dialogue in Chinese Ch’an Buddhism,” in Steven Heine and Dale S. Wright, eds., *The Kōan: Texts and Contexts in Zen Buddhism*.

Jan Nattier has gone over the entire manuscript, covering my precious words with a liberal coating of editorial ink. I am immensely grateful, even if only for the occasion to divert her attention temporarily from third-century Chinese Buddhist translations. William Bodiford, Stephen Bokenkamp, Robert Buswell, Robert Campany, and David Eckel have also reviewed the text, and all of them provided suggestions both meaningful and helpful. Even given this assistance, copy editor Nick Murray has found many ways to improve the text. I offer my sincere gratitude to these, my friends and colleagues.

Special thanks are due Reed Malcolm, the editor who appreciated the value of this book and shepherded it through production at the University of California Press. Reed deserves credit for the title, *Seeing through Zen*, which to my ears is wonderfully multivalent. In addition to the workshops and seminars at practice centers mentioned above, over the years I have inflicted these interpretations of Chinese Chan upon classes of undergraduate and graduate students at Harvard, Cornell, Indiana, and Hawai‘i Universities, as well as academic audiences at Stanford, Indiana, and Yale. To the participating faculty and students, whose probing questions did so much to push me into different perspectives on familiar material, I offer my thanks. Were there observations gone unheard or errors left uncorrected in spite of all this assistance, the cause is nothing other than my own limited understanding.

Ama ga koban
Honolulu, Hawai‘i
June 2000

Conventions

The goal of this book is to facilitate the different learning needs of a variety of readers. Hence the main text is for all readers, including beginners and nonspecialists, while the notes, character glossary and bibliography are intended for use by students and scholars. The specific conventions adopted are as follows.

1. I have included frequent cross-references within the text, so that readers can easily keep the different elements of the discussion fresh in their minds. Active reading requires a certain flapping of pages.
2. When I provide two sets of transliterations, unless otherwise noted the first will be Chinese (Pinyin spelling) and the second Japanese.
3. Chinese book titles are referred to by (sometimes abbreviated) English translations throughout with the Pinyin spelling given only on first occurrence. Please consult the character glossary for the original Chinese titles.
4. Names of individuals functioning in an East Asian context are given in traditional order, surname (in small caps) followed by given name. This is in contrast to the treatment of authors writing in English and the American Zen teachers of Japanese extraction mentioned in the preface, who are named according to English conventions.
5. Whenever possible I have translated the names of temples and locations. There are exceptions in cases where the Chinese name is already commonly known, as for Shaolin Temple (Shaolinsi).
6. All geographical locations mentioned are identified with modern Chinese province names as indicated one or both of the maps in chapter 1 (pp. 16 and 20).
7. With only a very few exceptions, Chinese characters have been restricted to the notes, character glossary (which includes only characters for terms and titles used in the main text), and the bibliography.
8. The maps, notes, and character glossary are the only places where I use Pinyin with tone indications, which are based on OGAWA Tamaki et al., *Kadokawa shinjigen, kaitei ban*; OZAKI Yūjirō et al., *Kadokawa daijigen*; and John DeFrancis, ed., *ABC Chinese Dictionary*.
9. For the Pinyin transliteration of Chinese terms, I have followed the orthography rules given by DeFrancis, appendix 1, 835–45.
10. Works cited after the abbreviation “T” are from the standard edition of the East Asian Buddhist canon, TAKAKUSU Junjirō and WATA-NABE Kaigyoku, eds., *Taishō shinshū daizōkyō*. Works cited with “X” are from the Taiwan reprint of the extended canon, *Xù zàng jīng*, published by Xinhua wenfeng chubanshe.
11. Unless otherwise noted, all translations are by the author. Material in square brackets in translated passages is interpolated to generate readable English; with one exception (on p. 80) material in parentheses has been added by the author.

McRae's Rules of Zen Studies

1. *It's not true, and therefore it's more important.*

The contents of Zen texts should not be evaluated using a simpleminded criterion of journalistic accuracy, that is, “Did it really happen?” For any event or saying to have occurred would be a trivial reality involving a mere handful of people at one imagined point in time, which would be overwhelmed by the thousands of people over the centuries who were involved in the creation of Zen legends. The mythopoeic creation of Zen literature implies the religious imagination of the Chinese people, a phenomenon of vast scale and deep significance.

2. *Lineage assertions are as wrong as they are strong.*

Statements of lineage identity and “history” were polemical tools of self-assertion, not critical evaluations of chronological fact according to some modern concept of historical accuracy. To the extent that any lineage assertion is significant, it is also a misrepresentation; lineage assertions that can be shown to be historically accurate are also inevitably inconsequential statements of religious identity.

3. *Precision implies inaccuracy.*

Numbers, dates, and other details lend an air of verisimilitude to a story, but the more they accumulate, the more we should recognize them as literary tropes. Especially in Zen studies, greater detail is an artifact of temporal distance, and the vagueness of earlier accounts should be comforting in its integrity. While we should avoid joining a misguided quest for origins, we should also be quick to distinguish between “good data” and ornamental fluff. Even as we ponder the vectors of medieval polemics.

4. *Romanticism breeds cynicism.*

Storytellers inevitably create heroes and villains, and the depiction of Zen's early patriarchs as icons cripples our understanding of both the Tang “golden age” and the supposedly stagnant formalism of the Song dynasty. If one side is romanticized, the other must be vilified, and both subjects pass incognito. The collusion between Zen romanticists and the apologists for Confucian triumphalism—which has Song Neo-Confucianism climbing to glory on the back of a defeated Buddhism—is an obstacle to the understanding of both Chan and the Chinese civil tradition. The corollary is this: Cold realism eliminates dismissive misapprehension.

Looking at Lineage

A Fresh Perspective on Chan Buddhism

How should we begin this discussion of Chan Buddhism? One device would be to begin with a story or some striking anecdote to arouse the reader's curiosity. There are certainly many good possibilities within the annals of Chan. One is the account of an earnest Chinese supplicant—the eventual second patriarch, Huike—cutting off his arm in order to hear the teachings from the enigmatic Indian sage Bodhidharma. How many times this story must have been told in meditation halls in China and throughout the world, in order to inspire trainees to greater effort! Or we could find something a bit less gruesome—perhaps the tale about Layman Pang sinking all his possessions to the bottom of a river because he had learned the futility of chasing after worldly riches. Surely this example of unencumbered freedom is meant to teach us a deep spiritual message? The stock of legendary accounts that might be used, each with slightly different import, is endless. And there are other possible beginnings, as well. Many authors have their own favored ways of characterizing the most essential features of Chan, presenting some short list of features to sum up the entire tradition. Or we could avoid such bland generalization and simply celebrate the incredible creativity of the Chan tradition over the centuries, its vibrancy as a religious phenomenon.

The approach adopted here—already taken by posing these very deliberations—is to begin by asking questions, to arouse in the reader not merely a raw curiosity but the faculties of critical interrogation as well. Specifically, let us begin by directly considering the question of how we should look at Chan Buddhism: What approaches should we adopt, and which should we avoid? What forms of analysis will be fruitful, and which would merely repeat commonly accepted stereotypes?

The question of how we should look at Chan Buddhism is one we should not attempt to avoid; simply ignore the issue and begin a recitation of facts and concepts would be to make an unspoken decision, to answer the question by adopting a policy of denial. But neither would it be appropriate for me to dictate the answer in flat and simple terms: as I compose these lines on the outskirts of Taipei at the very end of the twentieth century, and edit them in Honolulu at the beginning of the twenty-first, I am conscious of the incredible multivalence of cultural identity implicit in this process of exposition, both in my own person and those of my intended audiences. That is, in various ways and at different times I have been a scholar and practitioner, student and teacher, lover and hermit, and what I am about to present here I have learned through a series of extended educational encounters in America, Japan, and Taiwan. This text is intended for use by listeners and readers not only in China, but in Europe, the United States, and Japan as well—so how could I possibly presume to argue that there should be *one* way to look at Chan Buddhism? A multiplicity of perspectives and a certain fluidity of analytical typologies are givens in this postmodern world.

Deconstructing the Chan Lineage Diagram

For convenience, let me begin by defining a perspective on Chan that I wish to deconstruct and thereby avoid. I should confess that I mean only to caricature this perspective, so that we can use the observations made now to form a lever with which to push ourselves into a certain type of understanding (to paraphrase the positivist philosopher John Dewey and his student Hu Shih, who spoke of studying the past to create a lever with which to push China into a certain sort of future). The perspective to which I refer is the traditionalist approach depicted graphically in the lineage diagram presented in figure 1. Diagrams such as this are included in virtually every book on Chan that has ever been written, where they are used as a framework for presenting a historical narrative. Instead of plunging directly into that narrative and building upon the content of the diagram per se, though, we should first consider its semiotic impact as a medium of interpretation and communication. If the medium is the message (according to the saying popularized by Marshall McLuhan), what message is conveyed by the structure of the diagram itself? It is often noted that Chan claims to “not posit words” (*bu li wenzi, furyū monji*) and that it represents a “separate transmission outside the teaching” (*jiaowai biezhuān, kyōge betsuden*). Almost always—as I am about to do right now—these phrases are introduced with the ironic observation that Chan certainly does use a lot of words in describing its own teachings. We will come back to the Chan use of language and its not “positing” of words later, but here we can observe that the lineage diagram provides the basic model for how Chan appreciates its own historical background. That is, Chan does not define itself as being one among a number of Buddhist schools based on a particular scripture (such as the Tiantai [Tendai] school with its emphasis on the *Lotus Sūtra*, for example). Instead, Chan texts present the school as Buddhism itself, or as the central teaching of Buddhism, which has been transmitted from the seven Buddhas of the past to the twenty-eight Indian patriarchs, the six Chinese patriarchs, and all the generations of Chinese and Japanese Chan and Zen masters that follow. (Bodhidharma occupies a pivotal position as both the twenty-eighth Indian and first Chinese patriarch.) It took several centuries for this entire schema to be developed; the earliest building blocks appeared at the very end of the seventh century, and the complete system was published perhaps as early as 801 but certainly by the year 952.

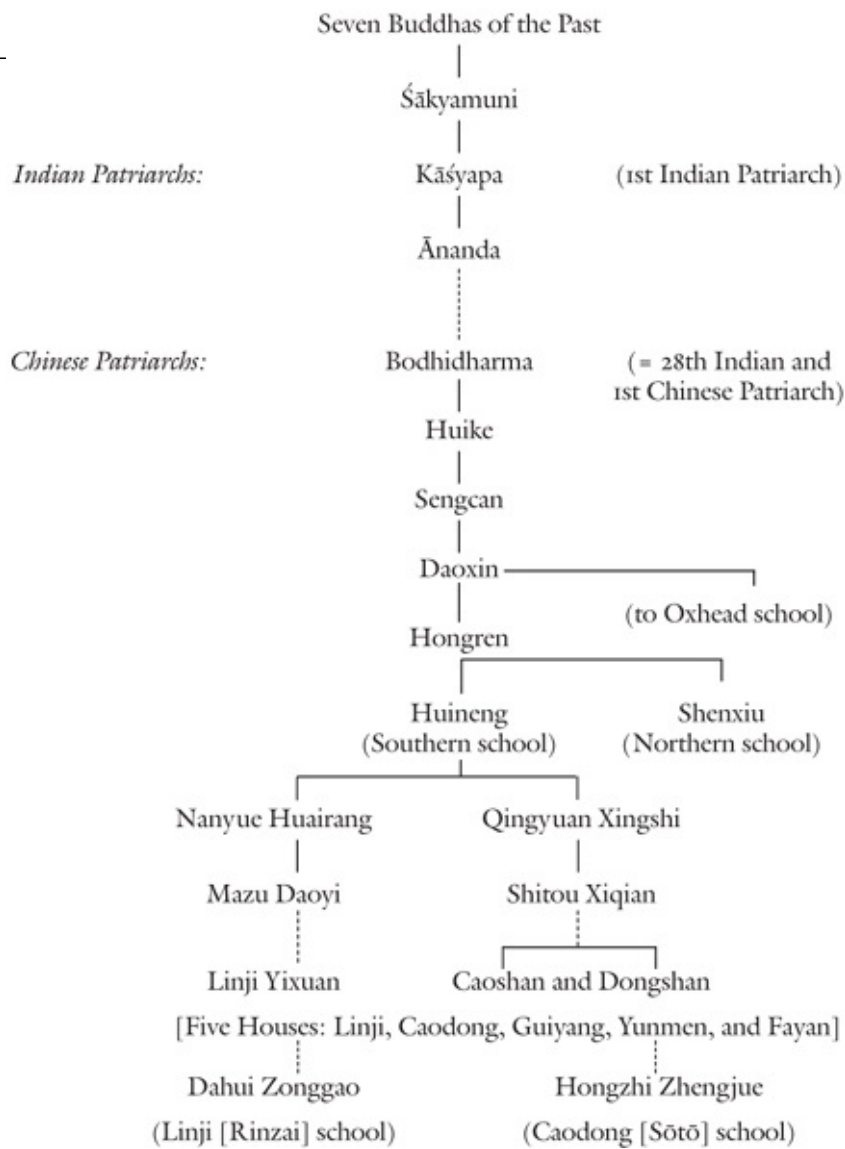


FIGURE 1. Lineage diagram of Chinese Chan Buddhism.

One of the advantages of beginning by considering this lineage diagram, to be sure, is that it introduces the most important players in our story. The seven Buddhas of the past are legendary figures to whom we need pay only scant attention; although Chan texts amplify and modify the religious identities somewhat, for our purposes we can admit them into evidence solely as part of the cultural repertoire Chan inherited from the larger tradition of East Asian Mahāyāna Buddhism. Chan has its own mythic take on Śākyamuni, of course, quite different from our own conception of him as the “historical” Buddha—but this too is a subject for another time. Nor must we pay much attention to the twenty-eight Indian patriarchs. The manner in which their hagiographies were explicated is a fascinating and exceedingly complex subject of study, but we do not have the space to consider it here.¹ On the other hand, the six Chinese patriarchs from Bodhidharma onward, along with Huineng and Shenxiu in the sixth generation and their several generations of disciples, will appear more often than any of the other players in this drama. (The reader will note at once that no disciples of Shenxiu are listed in our lineage diagram, which is a telling omission in itself. I consider this briefly on p. 10 below.) The figures remembered as icons of the Linji (Rinzai) and Caodong (Sōtō) schools, whose names adorn the balance of the diagram, are among the most important in the history of the tradition.

We can draw some important basic inferences from this transmission diagram. First, a note on historical origins: the Chan lineage scheme is a combined product of Indian and Chinese culture.

Often authors describe Chan as the “most Chinese” of all the Chinese Buddhist schools, and part of what they are referring to is the Chan genealogical model. (I am particularly allergic to this rhetoric since such expressions are generally little more than unexplicated tautologies generated through a sense of cultural chauvinism rather than real analytical insight. And the fact that D. T. Suzuki and others say virtually the same thing with regard to Japanese Zen, that it represents somehow the essence of *Japanese* culture, should alert us to both the essential vacuity and the strategic intentions of such sentiments.)² Actually, the origins of this lineage-based transmission scheme are to be found in Indian Buddhism and the fourth- and fifth-century Buddhist meditation tradition of Kashmir. There are a number of parallels between the Chan transmission scheme and Chinese family genealogies from the eighth century and later, but we should remember that Indian Buddhists had parents and teachers, family genealogies and initiation lineages, just as the Chinese did.³ As an amalgamation of Indian and Chinese elements, though, the Chinese Chan transmission schema developed within the Chinese Buddhist context and was particularly well adapted to that milieu. Just as DENG Xiaoping talked about “socialism with Chinese characteristics,” we could refer to the Chinese Chan transmission model as “Buddhist genealogical theory with Chinese characteristics.”

Second, by using the lineage diagram to define Chan as a “separate transmission outside the teachings,” the advocates of Chan were declaring their school to be profoundly different from, and fundamentally better than, all other Buddhist schools: where the other schools represented one interpretation of Buddhism, Chan constitutes the real thing, Buddhism itself. This is a polemical move, meant to establish the superiority of Chan over all other schools. Other East Asian Buddhist schools reacted in part by devising their own lineage transmission schemes, and in part by saying that Chan emphasized only one of the “three learnings” of morality, meditation, and wisdom. Whether we view medieval Chinese Buddhists as concerned solely with the highest forms of wisdom or as working to obtain imperial patronage and other this-worldly benefits, or engaged in both endeavors simultaneously, at the very least they were competing with their contemporaries for intellectual and cultural hegemony. We should thus not overlook the polemical quality of the lineage theory. Incidentally, to describe Chan Buddhism in terms of polemics and contestation is not to exercise any value judgment, let alone to denigrate the tradition, but merely to recognize historical fact.

Third, what counts in the Chan transmission scheme are not the “facts” of what happened in the lives of Śakyamuni, Bodhidharma, Huineng, and others, but rather how these figures were perceived in terms of Chan mythology. This point will come up repeatedly here, and I will argue a rather complex position: In case after case, what the texts say happened almost certainly did *not* occur, in terms of a straightforward but simpleminded criterion of journalistic accuracy. But rather than being fixated on notions of fact and fabrication, we should notice the very dynamism of the mythopoeic process involved. Whether or not any anecdote actually represents the words spoken and events that occurred “accurately” is only a historical accident, and in any case the supposedly “original” events would have involved only a very small number of people, at most the members of a single local community. What is of far greater consequence is the process by which that anecdote was generated and circulated, edited and improved, and thus transmitted throughout an entire population of Chan practitioners and devotees, until it became part of the fluid body of legendary lore by which Chan masters came to be identified throughout Chinese culture. This is McRae’s first law of Zen studies: “It’s not true, and therefore it’s more important.” This is to say that fiction—actually, a different sort of truth—is more important than the simplistic criterion of the question “Did it really happen?”⁴

Fourth, based on the rhetoric of *śūnyatā*, or emptiness,⁵ nothing is actually transmitted in the

transmission scheme. What occurs between each teacher and his successor is merely an approval authorization (*yinke; inka*) of the successor's attainment of complete enlightenment.⁶ This is first all a doctrinal principle of Chan Buddhism itself, but we should recognize that the most important parts of the diagram are not the separate names of individual patriarchs, but the spaces between them and the lines that join them. That is, what is being represented is not only a series of human figures but the encounters between each figure and his immediate predecessor and successor. As is frequently stressed in the texts of Chan, there is no "thing"—such as enlightenment, the Buddha-mind, whatever—that is actually passed from one patriarch to the next. The existence of such an entity would violate a fundamental Buddhist doctrinal theme, the denial of unchanging, substantive, and individual identity to the things and beings of this world. With regard to persons, this doctrinal theme is called "no-self" (*anātman*); with regard to all the various component elements of existence, including persons, this is called "emptiness" (*śūnyatā*). This is not a merely philosophical consideration, but rather an existential posture with profound genealogical impact: the focus is not on "what" is being transmitted, but on the relationship of encounter between the Buddhas and Patriarchs. 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.

Fifth, since the enlightenment of each Buddha and Patriarch is complete, there is no differentiation between the religious status of the Indian Buddhas and Patriarchs and their Chinese counterparts. This was perhaps the most important reason why this lineage-based exposition was attractive to medieval Chinese Buddhists, since it raised the authority of native Chinese figures to equal those of their Indian predecessors. This is very important in terms of the sinification of Buddhism, that is, the adaptation of Buddhism within Chinese culture, a subject that is vitally relevant to a wide range of subjects in Chinese religions and Chinese studies in general. At the moment, though, what I want to emphasize is the most striking and most frequently overlooked characteristic of this diagram: the homologizing impact of its very simple lines of succession.

By representing Chan Buddhism in terms of a straight-line succession from the seven Buddhas of the past through the six Chinese Patriarchs, diagrams such as this are used to simplify fantastical and complicated sets of cultural and religious phenomena. Every time a straight-line relationship between two masters is posited in a lineage diagram, an entire world of complexity, an intricate universe of human relationships and experiences, is effectively eliminated from view. Could any religious figure's identity possibly be adequately summarized by selecting only one out of a whole lifetime of relationships? Even a quick look at the biographies of Chinese Chan masters shows the extent of the distortion involved: where the sources are adequate, we sometimes see multiple awakenings and experiences⁷ catalyzed by different teachers and events, yet in the lineage diagrams these are all reduced to single lines of transmission. The use of lineage diagrams to represent the Chan tradition then—and their use is as old as the tradition itself, since it was by explicating genealogical specificity that Chan generated its own identity as a specific religious movement—is a hegemonic trope, the willful extension of one way of perceiving the world to the exclusion of all other viewpoints. (I briefly discuss the various branches and divisions of the diagram beginning on p. 9 below.)

Sixth, the "genealogical model" is important not only for the historical self-understanding of the Chan school in its transmission from Śakyamuni Buddha through Bodhidharma and onward, but also for the manner in which it defines how Chan spiritual practice itself is carried out. That is, in contrast to a basically Indian conception of meditation practice as an individual yogic endeavor of self-purification and progressive advancement toward buddhahood, the Chan genealogical model implies

that the most important aspect of spiritual cultivation takes place in the *encounter* between teacher and student. Chan trainees still spent long hours in the meditation hall—we can be sure of that, even though the texts often do not bother confirming the fact—but the focus of Chan rhetoric and literature is on the dialogues and exchanges between each master and his students, or between each student destined to be a master and his various teachers. It is thus not only the Chan school's self-understanding of its own religious history, but the religious practice of Chan itself that is fundamentally genealogical. By saying that Chan practice is fundamentally *genealogical*, I mean that it is derived from a genealogically understood encounter experience that is *relational* (involving interaction between individuals rather than being based solely on individual effort), *generational* (that it is organized according to parent-child, or rather teacher-student, generations), and *reiterative* (i.e., intended for emulation and repetition in the lives of present and future teachers and students). No matter what the comparison or relationship between Chinese Chan and earlier forms of Indian Buddhist meditation practice, this particular complex of qualities is not found in other schools or forms of Buddhist training.⁸

In the most basic historical terms, though, we should recognize that the homologizing impact of the Chan lineage diagram represents a profound distortion of the subject matter. This is McRae's second rule of Zen studies: "Lineage assertions are as wrong as they are strong." In more formal language this means that lineage assertions are problematic in direct proportion to their significance. That is, every time we read that the masters of such-and-such a group are related to each other in a lineal succession, the statement is probably inaccurate in some sense, and the more important it is to the religious identity of the individuals involved, the less accurate it will be. If nothing much is made of the relationship, the lineage assertion is more likely to be correct than if a great deal rides on it. Almost always, of course, the figure at the end of the list, or even that individual's students, has the most at stake in making such assertions. And if his religious identity must be defined on the basis of lineal succession, if his historical status depends on being the recipient of the cumulative charisma of one particular set of predecessors, then it always seems that some significant distortion of the facts has taken place. Of course, my use of the *word facts* should remind you of the first rule, which remains relevant here: The presentation of reality in lineage schema represents a certain type of myth-making, and what is not "true" per se is inevitably more important!

Seventh, I referred above to "each teacher and *his* successor" (see p. 6), and the gender-specific terminology is appropriate. The Chan tradition is overwhelmingly male-dominated, and the strong implications of the term *patriarchal* in English (referring both to Chan figureheads and a male-centered ideology) is entirely suitable here. Nancy Jay has analyzed how genealogical systems tend to create justifications for removing women from the nexus of power and fecundity,⁹ and in a later chapter, we will consider the manner in which Chan represented a way of organizing power within the Chinese Buddhist monastic establishment. There is also, of course, a broader, gender-related issue concerning Chan as a patriarchal ideology: to put it bluntly, Was Chan a weapon used to oppress women within Chinese society? Alas, I cannot deliberate on this issue in these pages, but when the subject comes up, scholars should certainly not shrink from it. This awareness, however, is helpful here in a different and perhaps even larger sense. I do find it germane to deal with the following variant of the question: Was Chan a weapon in the oppression of Chinese religious practitioners in general, or did it serve to suppress certain groups of them? This is a shocking question, to be sure, but it seems to me that any means by which knowledge is structured—and the lineage format is certainly that—both *allows* and *suppresses* different types of perspectives. I am by no means unsympathetic to the Chan tradition, nor to the realm of Buddhist meditation and spiritual cultivation in general, but

consideration of how the Chan school's dominance in Chinese Buddhism may have militated against alternative viewpoints seems an obvious aspect of our intellectual responsibility.

At this point, you may be surprised that we have derived so many inferences from one simple diagram, but we could certainly coax numerous additional insights from it if space were not an issue. Let us leave further comment on the Chan lineage diagram and the genealogical identity of the Chan tradition until later, though, and turn instead to the reason we began this discussion in the first place.

Avoiding the “String of Pearls” Fallacy

The preceding observations regarding the lineage diagram are to some extent preventive medicine or prophylaxis against a type of interpretation to be avoided. Simply put, the message is this: To represent Chan Buddhism in terms that are congruent with the lineage paradigm is to run the risk of mere repetition, without saying anything fundamentally insightful. Rather than performing legitimate analytical investigations, to do so would be merely to recapitulate an inherited symbolic system, and in this context one's most cherished intellectual nuances would be nothing more than trivial variations on the genealogical model. Here it is useful to make a clear insider/outsider distinction: What is both expected and natural for a religious practitioner operating *within* the Chan episteme, what is necessary in order to achieve membership within the patriarchal lineage, becomes intellectually debilitating for those standing, even if only temporarily, *outside* the realm of Chan as its observers and analysts. What from the standpoint of Chan religious practice may be absolutely essential becomes, from the standpoint of intellectual analysis, the passive submission to a hegemony, the unwitting contraction of an intellectual pathology.

So what is it that we should not be doing? Or, to put it another way, how can we recognize when we are falling, or in danger of falling, into patterns that inhibit our ability to see the history of Chan in all its rich complexity?

Seen from this perspective, the issue is really quite simple: Whenever we pretend to explain Chan in terms of lineal successions from one great master to another, we run the risk of committing the “string of pearls” fallacy, in which the evolution of Chan Buddhism is described in terms of a sequence of individual masters like pearls on a string. This is a variant of the “great man” fallacy of historical writing, in which one explains the inevitably messy details of past realities in terms of the willful endeavors of a limited number of heroic men. (Once again, the gender-specific terminology is warranted.) To be more logically precise, it is also an example of the fallacy of archetypes, which “consists in conceptualizing change in terms of the re-enactment of primordial archetypes which exist outside of time.”¹⁰

In terms of Zen studies, this tendency is starkly apparent in the way Dunhuang manuscripts have been used to supplement rather than radically transform the appreciation of Chan in many writings. Atrove of cultural treasures similar to the Dead Sea scrolls, the Dunhuang manuscripts were discovered in a walled-up cave in Chinese Central Asia at the turn of the twentieth century and then dispersed to various libraries throughout the world. They provided a cross-section of Chan documents from the eighth to the tenth centuries, just before the great editorial homogenization of the Song dynasty took place.¹¹ Access to these manuscripts has allowed scholars to explore the early phases of Chinese Chan Buddhism in ways that would simply not have been possible in their absence, and the analysis of this magnificent trove has occupied the attentions of scholars (not only in Chan, but

other fields of Buddhist and Daoist studies, and various realms of historical and sociological research (as well) for the entire twentieth century. However, in Chan studies, evidence from the Dunhuang manuscripts has most often been used merely to paint better features onto the same old traditional picture, merely to add attractive detail to the genealogical model described above. Thus, scholars have used Dunhuang manuscripts in conjunction with other evidence to devise more vivid portraits of Bodhidharma, Huineng, and others as *individual* figures, without changing the framework in which these individuals are presented in any substantial manner, and certainly without trying to work out the cultural and religious dynamics that led to their inclusion in the genealogical paradigm in the first place. There are exceptions, of course, but they are comparatively few and far between.

I am not suggesting that we never include descriptions of lineage successions in our writing of Chan—far from it—but only that, when we do so, we should be conscious of the reasons for their use and remain aware of the risks involved. Not only would it be impossible to talk about Chan without ever using concepts related to lineage—to the extent it can be described as a continuous set of processes, Chan is at its most profound level a *genealogical* set of phenomena—but we will gain the greatest benefit from shifting our focus and perspective repeatedly as we move through the evidence. To commit the “string of pearls” fallacy is to remain fixed and unaware in a single posture. Rather than simply move to a different static position, however, we should work to illuminate our subject from a number of angles, to encounter it with different aspects of our interpretive capacities.

A Provisional Device: The Phases of Chan

Figure 2 (p. 13) is a simple chart describing Chan in a manner quite different from that of the lineage diagram (fig. 1) discussed above. Where the traditional Chan diagram lists names of individual human beings, this chart lists named phases or trends in the evolution of Chan.¹² The names of these phases or trends are not universally accepted in writings about Chan, and the boundaries between them are subject to debate. I preserve these ambiguities by not adopting this terminology and periodization without question throughout these chapters; on the contrary, we should pay close attention to the intrinsic fuzziness of the borders between the phases named so uniquely and unambiguously here. It is in large part through considering the failure of any margins to tightly capture these arbitrary entities that we will be able to see the utility of this periodization.

Each of the named phases refers not to a specific set of individuals per se (although some of the most representative figures are listed), but to a style or configuration of religious activity that is known through a variety of sources. One of the primary models by which each phase is characterized is, of course, a list of teachers, known as patriarchs in the traditional lineage scheme, who function as figureheads for a certain type of religious identity. These men (and very occasionally women) serve as exemplars of enlightened behavior, whose stories are told and retold in order to pattern the behavior of subsequent generations of students.¹³ (Even as Chan involves the transcendence of patterned behavior in enlightened spontaneity, this abandoning of patterning must itself be patterned in order to be understood, modeled before it can be imitated, deconstructed, and refigured.) Information about the figureheads, as well as doctrinal explanations and other types of information, was circulated both orally and through written texts. Hence each phase of Chan can be described in terms of multiple dimensions: its exemplary human representatives, the geography and timing of their activities, the texts that describe their activities and convey their teachings, and so forth. Figure 2 provides

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