

NEW TRADITIONS IN EAST ASIAN BUDDHISM

Professor Russell Kirkland
Department of Religion
University of Georgia

CH'AN BUDDHISM ("ZEN")

Name: Chinese *Ch'an*; Japanese *Zen* (from Sanskrit *dhyāna*).

Origins: Arose in China ca. 6th century CE. Traditionally said to have been brought from India to China by **Bodhidharma**. A much later story (from the 11th century) traces Ch'an back to the Buddha himself ("the Flower Sermon"). Actually, Ch'an simply arose in China as a result of arguments among Chinese Buddhists about the relationship of "enlightenment" and "practice." One approach to those issues was recorded in a text called *The Platform Sutra of the Sixth Patriarch*. Composed sometime in the eighth century, it presents teachings of Hui-neng (638-713), and stories about him intended to arouse the reader's admiration. Those stories are unreliable (e.g., they portray Hui-neng as an illiterate, which was likely quite untrue).

Teachings:

Ch'an can be understood as an attempt to find Buddhist answers to Chinese questions. Some of its roots lay in **indigenous Chinese thought**, especially the teachings of the Taoist Chuang-tzu, but also in other Confucian and Taoist ideals. (See below.)

Yet, Ch'an arose among Chinese Buddhists, who wanted to be Buddhist. They found precedents for most of their basic ideas in certain Indian Buddhist ideas, particularly (1) the concept of *buddhatā* ("**Buddha-nature**") and (2) the doctrine of *Śūnyatā* ("**Emptiness**") – the teaching that all dualities are ultimately illusory. That doctrine had been expressed in the Indian *Prajñā-pāramitā* scriptures, as well as in the brief *Heart Sutra* (a *Prajñā-pāramitā* text assembled in China from Indian parts). According to the doctrine of **Emptiness**, there is ultimately no difference between *nirvana* and *samsara*; hence, there is no reason to seek to achieve *nirvana*. Therefore, the practice of Buddhism must not really be about achieving enlightenment, for there is nothing really to be achieved: our "original mind" (a Confucian concept, from the ancient Chinese thinker Mencius) is really the same as the "Buddha mind." So the meaning of "enlightenment" needs to be re-understood. Here, Ch'an thinkers found answers in a variety of **other Mahāyāna scriptures**, such as the *Avatamsaka sutra*, the *Lankavatara sutra*, the *Śurangama sutra*, and the Diamond Sutra (to which Hui-neng credited his own enlightenment).

However, an argument remained within Zen. Even if "enlightenment" is not really "achieved," is it actually (1) an experience that occurs to a person, or is it really just (2) a fundamental element of our own reality? In other words, is *bodhi* ("enlightenment") the same as *buddhatā* ("buddha-nature," which is universal), or is it something distinct? Both answers have been embraced in Ch'an/Zen. Hence, for the practice of Zen, there are two very different models. One, seen in **Rinzai Zen**, is a "recognition model," according to which our goal is to "see our nature and become (a/the) Buddha" (*kenshō jōbutsu*); such an experience is called a *satori*. Here: we already have *buddhatā*, but still need to attain *bodhi*. But in **Sōtō Zen** (est. in Japan by **Dōgen**, 13th c.), one sees an "enactment model": *buddhatā is bodhi*, so we are already a Buddha, and merely need to act like a Buddha. One does that through *shikan taza* ("just sitting"), i.e., monastic meditation. Each of those models can be understood equally well

in the terms of certain Mahāyāna Buddhist texts, or in terms of indigenous Chinese traditions.

Modern presentations of Ch'an/Zen often ignorantly reduce it to a supposed set of "basic teachings" in four lines:

"A special transmission outside the scriptures
No dependence on texts
Direct pointing to the human heart/mind
Seeing one's nature and becoming Buddha."

But in fact, those lines are just a poem from a teacher of the late T'ang period (probably Nanch'uan). It was not known to Ch'an practitioners before him (such as Hui-neng), and *the teachings of many Zen masters (before and after him) are quite different*; some (like **Dōgen**) call such teachings utterly false. Note also that Ch'an actually arose from **Chinese arguments about Mahāyāna scriptures**, and virtually all Ch'an/Zen masters and students wrote about such things and studied each other's writings. The greatest Ch'an/Zen masters -- Hui-neng; Lin-chi (founder of Rinzai Zen); Tsung-mi; Ta-hui; Eisai; Dōgen; Hakuin; et al. -- were all intellectuals who wrote sophisticated *philosophical texts* on Zen. And the scriptures are still discussed and chanted in Zen practice today. So **DO NOT define "Zen" in terms of that poem!!**

Continuities between Ch'an/Zen and Confucianism (and Chinese thought in general):

1. A focus on "*real life*," upon the living person, rather than upon abstractions.
2. We recover our pure *original nature* (as suggested by Mencius, 4th c. BCE). But the Ch'an people wished to be "Buddhist," so they explained this belief in terms of the Mahāyāna concept of the Buddha-nature)
3. *The human being is perfectible*: no one is inherently incapable of achieving the ideal. Yet in reality, few people will actually attain the ideal, and *our teachings are for that special few*.
4. No external powers are involved: we attain the ideal through *our own individual efforts*. This also makes sense in terms of early Buddhism.
5. We *re-achieve* what the great exemplars of old achieved (the Confucian "sage-kings" / the Buddha).

Continuities between Ch'an/Zen and "Classical Taoism" (specifically Chuang-tzu):

1. *Distrust of intellectuality* (though many Zen masters were sophisticated intellectuals).
2. The goal is something to be achieved through *direct personal experience*; it is ultimate, it is unifying, and it is a return to our own true reality.
3. *Irreverence* toward conventional patterns of thought and behavior. Zen critiques "other" Buddhists the way that Taoists like Chuang-tzu critiqued thinkers of other schools. Yet, "other Buddhists" often meant others within Ch'an/Zen, so ***Zen is constantly arguing with itself***.
4. The literature is anecdotal and allusive, not discursive.
5. Methods of teaching are often radical and jarring, intended to jolt, to de-rail ordinary thinking processes, to open the way for a new awareness of reality.
6. The teaching method includes *a very impish humor*. This humor is often irreverent, and occasionally obscene -- all the better to jolt the student to a new awareness of reality.

The Contrasting “Zens” of Japan

1. Rinzai Zen (Chinese *Lin-chi*)

Introduced from China by **Eisai** (1141-1215), who is credited with bringing tea to Japan. Rejected at capital; found acceptance among the warrior class (*samurai*) at Kamakura. Eisai believed in *mappō*, and accepted both the esoteric *mikkyō* practices and the devotional *nembutsu* meditation practiced at Mt. Hiei.

Emphasized disciplined meditation (*zazen*) under the guidance of a teacher.

Goal: *kenshō*, "seeing into one's true nature"—a repeatable experience, also called a *satori*.

Rinzai temples operated schools that transmitted Neo-Confucianism; credited with inspiring many developments in Japanese culture, including the Tea Ceremony, Nō drama, *haiku* poetry, and other famous elements of art and literature.

Developed a curriculum of *kōan* study under disciples of **Hakuin** (1686-1769).

Popularized in the West by D. T. Suzuki (1870-1966).

Sōtō Zen (Chinese *Ts'ao-tung*)

Introduced from China by Dōgen (1200-1253).

Rejected by the authorities at Mt. Hiei, Dōgen established a new center (the Eihei-ji) in the distant north; he had several women disciples.

Dōgen criticized other schools (even Eisai's Zen) as "impure Buddhism": "the true intention of the Buddha can be found only in the sutras."

Teachings: "all existence is Buddha-ness"; later: "Zen is everyday life."

Practice: "sitting (*zazen*) only."

Goal: none. Since we already have "original enlightenment" (*hongaku*—a concept borrowed from Shingon, and shared with Pure Land and Nichiren), we need only sit like the Buddha sat.

Dōgen stressed the necessity of monastic practice; the later Sōtō tradition did not.

Accepted among the peasantry, not the *samurai*; not widely popularized in the West.

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