



Chan (Zen) Meditation:

Gradual vs Sudden Approach

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Chan Meditation - Definition

- The term 'Chan' in Sanskrit is *dhyana*, which literally means 'meditation', 'thought' or 'reflection'. Dhyana has its roots in ancient Indian tradition of yoga and described in the Vedas as a form of Indian asceticism. (Dumoulin 18)
- Chan in China also refers to '*ding*' (定) which means to settle the mind in a form of meditation.
- Shakyamuni Buddha attained his enlightenment under the Bodhi tree by practicing the Yoga meditation. Therefore, meditation is an important means to enlightenment in Buddhism.
- Chinese Chan blended in the concept of 'settled' with the yoga praxis that form a unique form of meditation for the path to attain enlightenment. (Hung 16)

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Dumoulin, Heinrich. Zen enlightenment: Origins and Meaning. Trans. John C. Maraldo. New York: Weather Hill Inc., 1979.

Hung, Qigao 洪啓嵩. 禪宗的傳承與參禪的方法 The Lineage and practice of the School of Chan. 臺北市Taipei: 全佛文化事業有限公司, 2005.

A Brief History of Chinese Chan Meditation

- The beginning of Chinese Chan was marked by Bodhidharma (d. 5236 CE) of the sixth century, the first patriarch of Chan, but Chinese Chan can be traced back to as early as 2nd century when An-shi Gao (148-170) arrived in Lo-yang China and translated a number of scriptures on Hinayana meditation and taught meditation himself.
- Meditation was not popular in China until Kumarajiva (344-412) who came to China and translated a number of critical Mahayana sutras, especially the sutras of Perfection of Wisdom. He blended Hinayana meditation with Daoist meditation and added the Mahayana concept of 'Prajna' to a new form of Chan. However, it was Bodhidharma, who established Chinese Chan firmly into Chinese Buddhism, and he is considered the founder of Chinese Chan. (Hung 16) (1)



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Hung, Qigao 洪啓嵩. 禪宗的傳承與參禪的方法 The Lineage and practice of the School of Chan. 臺北市Taipei: 全佛文化事業有線公司, 2005.

Notes:

1. Major characteristics of Bodhidharma's Chan practices consist of mind-to-mind transmission, without reliance on words and letters, and the direct pointing to the mind to realize the Buddha nature of the mind.

Enlightenment Process in Chan meditation

- Regarding the process of enlightenment, Hinayana and Mahayana traditions hold different theories. The Hinayanists follow the Four Noble Truths for enlightenment. The process of attaining enlightenment is to go through four different stages: stream-enterer (Sotāpanna 須陀洹), once-returner (Sakadāgāmi 入流), non-returner (Anāgāmi 不還) and Arhat (阿羅漢). In Mahayana and in Chan the process to enlightenment consists of going through 10 different Bodhisattva stages.
- According to Dasabhumika Sutra (十地經), the 10 Bodhisattva stages include:
 1. Stage of Bliss
 2. Stage of Undefined
 3. Stage of Emitting Light
 4. Stage of Blazing wisdom
 5. Stage of Difficult Conquest
 6. Stage of Manifestation
 7. Stage of Travelling afar
 8. Stage of Unmoving
 9. Stage of Wholesome Wisdom
 10. Stage of Dharma Cloud

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“Four stages of awakening”, Wikipedia. March 14, 2024.
<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Four_stages_of_awakening>.

Types of enlightenment in Chan meditation: Gradual vs Sudden enlightenment

- There are two types of enlightenment in Chan: Gradual and Sudden.
- The concept of sudden enlightenment was first introduced by Zhi Dun (支盾314-366) in 3rd century based on his exegesis on the Dasabhumika Sutra (十地經). He believed a sudden enlightenment takes place on the 7th Bodhisattva stage. Stages 1-6 are considered gradual enlightenment. (Kim 31)
- Dao Sheng (道生360-434) rejected Zhi Dun's sudden enlightenment on the 7th stage and believed sudden enlightenment occurs on the 10th stage as a total liberation (Liu 393).
- Based on the One Vehicle concept from Lotus Sutra, Dao Sheng believed One Vehicle, the Buddha Vehicle, is the only path to enlightenment, any other paths are merely skillful means, and he rejected any gradual enlightenment. (Kuo 2)

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Kim, Young-Ho. Tao-sheng's commentary on the Lotus Sutra: A Study and translation. Bloomington, Albany: State University of New York Press, 2005.

Liu Guijie 劉貴傑. “竺道生思想之理論特色及其價值意義 The Theoretical Characteristics and its Meanings of Dao Sheng's thoughts”. 華岡佛學學報 Hua Wang Buddhist Studies Reports, 06(July 1983), 377-405.

Kuo, Xiaoxun 郭朝順. “賢首法藏的「頓教概念」的研究 The Study of 'Immediate Teaching' of Hsien-Shou Fatzang”. 哲學與文化 Monthly Philosophy and Culture, 1992(7), pp. 656-669.

Types of Chan Meditations

- Various Chan meditation techniques developed after Bodhidharma. Not all Chan practices advocate Sudden enlightenment; some are considered gradual, such as Letters Chan (文字禪), Tathagatagarbha Chan, Thought Before Ideation Chan (看話禪), Buddha Recitation Chan (念佛禪), etc.
- Guifeng Zongmi (圭峰宗密 780-841) classified different Chan practices (or schools) into three different systems: Elimination of Delusion for Cultivating the Mind, Complete Emptiness and Direct Manifestation of the Nature of Mind . (Wu 2)
- Chan practices of the first two systems take the gradual approach. The 3rd system is the direct revelation of the Buddha nature taking the sudden approach to enlightenment. Patriarch Chan and Hui-neng's Chan belong to the 3rd system. (Wu 1)



Wu, Limin 吳立民. “論祖師禪 On the Patriarch Chan”. 中國禪學（卷一） Chan Studies (Volume 1). Beijing; 中華書局出版社, 2002.

Three Systems (or Methods) of Chan practices

The three systems hold three different worldviews.

1. Elimination of Delusion for Cultivating the Mind (息妄修心宗)

This system holds a realistic view of Nirvana, such as Shen-siu's Northern School of Chan.

2. Complete Emptiness (泯絕無寄宗)

This system holds an idealistic view of all realities, including Nirvana. This method focuses on the contemplation of wisdom for a realization of complete emptiness. Jen-jue (1091-1157) of Chao-dong, the founder of the Stillness Contemplation Zen, was one of the representatives of this system. It is still a gradual approach since it follows bi-kuan meditation for calming the mind.

3. Direct Manifestation of the Nature of Mind (直顯心性宗)

This system holds a non-dualistic view of all realities including Nirvana. Schools of this system take a direct approach to enlightenment by realizing the wisdom of the true nature without relying on words and language. It is considered a sudden approach and Huineng's approach is a Sudden approach.

Elimination of Delusion for Cultivating the Mind

The Gradual approach

- Chan schools under this system believe the existence of Nirvana for everyone, and the way to attain enlightenment to enter Nirvana is by eradicating defilements or afflictions in order to reveal the Buddha nature.
- Shen-siu (神秀) of the Northern school of Chan is one of the examples. He used the analogy of dusting the mirror (symbolizes the Buddha nature) to illustrate the process of enlightenment. To attain enlightenment, one has to constantly eradicate defilements that cover the Buddha nature regardless of the length of time that might take and the different level of spiritual faculty that one might have. (1)
- Shen-siu's approach is considered a gradual approach to enlightenment



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Notes:

1. The body is the Bodhi tree; the mind is a bright mirror; one has to constantly dust the mirror; so that it would not be covered by dust. 身是菩提樹，心如明鏡台。時時勤拂拭，莫使有塵埃。

Complete Emptiness The Gradual approach

- Chan schools under this system focus on emptying the mind for enlightenment.
- Jen-jue (宏智正覺 1091-1157) of Chao-dong school (曹洞宗), founder of Stillness Contemplation Chan (默照禪), was one of the representatives of this system. (Wu 15)
- Jen-jue argued that the emptiness of the mind is the origin of all living beings. When the mind is empty, the original nature of living beings and the universe will manifest. He held that when both the contemplator and the object of contemplation (the mind) become totally empty, the Buddha nature will reveal. (Fang 16)
- This Chan practice is still considered a gradual approach, because it follows Bodhidharma's bi-kuan meditation method (壁觀禪) and Shen-siu's rigorous sitting meditation for contemplating the mind.



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Wu, Limin 吳立民. “論祖師禪 On the Patriarch Chan”. 中國禪學 (卷一) Chan Studies (Volume 1). Beijing; 中華書局出版社, 2002.

Fang, Litian 方立天. “文字禪、看話禪、默照禪與念佛禪 On Letters Chan, Kanhua Chan, the Mozhao Chan and the Buddha recitation Chan”. 中國禪學 (卷一) Chan Studies (Volume 1). Beijing; 中華書局出版社, 2002.

Direct Manifestation of the Nature of Mind - 1

The Sudden approach

- This system is considered the *Madhyamaka* (Middle Way) Chan that takes a direct approach to enlightenment by realizing the wisdom (*prajna*) of the true nature without relying on words and language. (Wu 1) (1)
- The Madhyamaka Chan reveals the non-dualistic of Buddha nature. (2)
- Daisetz Suzuki described this direct method as an act of seizing the fleeing life as it flees, not after it has flown.
- Suzuki further explained life moving on an axis of time. As time passes by, it is gone forever. When that split of second is seized, there is no memory or ideas that can built and no reasoning avails. Any ideation or the use of language will lose the directness of life, because they are just images or echoes of something no longer there. (Suzuki 130)

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Suzuki, David. Zen Buddhism: Selected Writings of D. T. Suzuki. Ed. William Barrett. New York: Doubleday, 1996.

Wu, Limin 吳立民. “論祖師禪 On the Patriarch Chan”. 中國禪學（卷一） Chan Studies (Volume 1). Beijing; 中華書局出版社, 2002.

Notes:

1. Mind to mind transmission, without reliance on words and letters and the direct pointing to the mind to realize the Buddha nature. 不立文字，教外別傳，直指人心，見性成佛.
2. The Buddha nature is neither permanent and nor impermanent. Therefore, there is a continuity, which is called non-dual. 佛性非常非無常，是故不斷，名為不二。

Direct Manifestation of the Nature of Mind - 2

The Sudden approach

- The enlightenment in this direct method is a sudden flip of reality that Chan schools of this method consider Buddha reality. Patriarch Chan and Hui-neng's Chan follow this method.
- Both the Direct Manifestation of the Nature of Mind Chan schools and Chan schools with Contemplate Emptiness method focus on transforming the mind, but the difference is the method of contemplation. The latter takes contemplation of the mind as an objective observation, while Hui-neng's or the Patriarch Chan takes the Middle Way of contemplation on the mind, and that is neither contemplate nor not contemplate. When one reaches a state of not-contemplating while contemplating, one is said to be in a state of 'doubt' (疑情). When the doubt is cleared up, the Buddha nature will be revealed. (Wu 3)
- Hui-neng uses this Middle Way of contemplation as a direct method for enlightenment.

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Hui-neng's Chan Meditation Method - 1

The Sudden approach

- Hui-neng (慧能 638-713) of the Southern school of Chan, developed the theory of Sudden enlightenment based on several Mahayana scriptures. One of them is the *Tathagatagarbha* doctrine which posits that all living beings possess Buddha nature which consists of wisdom (*prajna*). Since ordinary people are deluded, they cannot see this pure self-nature. If one realizes one's own self-nature, one can suddenly enlightened to Buddhahood.
- Hui-neng used a Middle Way approach that aimed at transforming a dualistic mind into a non-dualistic one. According to Hui-neng, with a non-dualistic mind one can suddenly reveal the true Buddha nature and attain enlightenment in a single thought at any moment.



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Hui-neng's Chan Meditation Method - 2

The Sudden approach

- Hui-neng's Sudden approach is based on the monistic view of samadhi and wisdom. In the Platform sutra, he told the assembly,

"Spiritual friends! My dharma door is based on Samadhi and wisdom. Assembly, please do not get confused [and] said that samadhi and wisdom are different. Samadhi and wisdom are one, not two. Samadhi is the wisdom's body and wisdom is samadhi's function."
- His Middle Way approach to enlightenment is the practices of no-thought (無念), non-characteristics (無相) and non-fixation (無住). (1)

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Notes:

1. (from Platform Sutra) Good friends, since time immemorial this school of ours has first established freedom of thought as the source, freedom from form as the substance, and freedom from fixation as the basis. Freedom from form means detachment from forms in the midst of forms. Freedom from thought means having no thought in the midst of thoughts. As for freedom from fixation, while the basic nature of humanity is in the midst of the world. 善知識！我此法門，從上以來，先立無念為宗，無相為體，無住為本。無相者，於相而離相。無念者，於念而無念。無住者，人之本性。

Hui-neng's Chan Meditation Practices - 1

No-Thought (無念)

- Hui-neng considered thoughts as both the source of afflictions and also the source for enlightenment. In this practice, one tackles thoughts as the source of enlightenment. By Middle Way approach to enlightenment, the practice of no-thought is to tap onto this no-thought by having thought as not having thought at all.
- Since wisdom (*prajna*) is non-discriminatory in nature, “having thought as not having thought” means not to have discriminatory thoughts (Liu 68).
- The non-discriminatory thought helps to bring wisdom from the unconscious to the conscious mind.

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Liu, Sihan 劉斯翰。 “頓悟說和六祖 The Discussio of Sudden Enlightenment and the Sixth Patriarch”. 廣東社會科學 Guang Dong Social Science, 3(1997): 64-69.

Hui-neng's Chan Meditation Practices - 2

Non-Characteristics (無相)

- The fundamental practice of non-characteristics is detachment.
- Thoughts rely on characteristics of a mental object to exist. If one is detached from characteristics, thoughts cease to exist.
- Detachment helps one calm down the unsettled mind.
- It is an aid to the practice of non-thought.

Hui-neng's Chan Meditation Practices - 3

Non-Fixation (無住)

- The practice of non-fixation is based on the Diamond sutra and was implemented into Hui-neng's practice of Sudden Enlightenment. The Diamond sutra identifies four different kinds of characteristics upon which the mind becomes fixed on: the self, a person, sentient beings and life-span. If a thought get fixated, the subsequent thoughts will also get fixated. Then, afflictions arise.
- Non-fixation helps the mind become detached from thoughts and allow the mind to penetrate unobstructively.

Conclusion

- Chan after Bodhidharma and until Hui-neng are referred to *Tathagarta* Chan and regarded as the gradual approaches since they have a dualistic view of affliction and self-nature. Hui-neng's view of self-nature on the other hand is monistic. He held that Buddha nature and affliction are not different from each other.
- Based on the Tathagartagarbha sutra that all living beings have Buddha nature, he applied the Madhyamaka philosophy into his Chan practices of no-thought, non-characteristics and no-fixation to let *prajna* to reveal the Buddha nature.
- He encouraged those with greater spiritual faculties, who have the capacity to reveal their Buddha nature in one single no-thought at any moment, to adhere this Sudden approach. But he also advocate a gradual approach for those with lesser spiritual faculties to work their way to the point that suddenly they can reveal their true Buddha nature to attain Buddhahood.

Conclusion

- Does Hui-neng's Sudden approach work effectively? I think it depends on one's spiritual faculty and one's karma. There are couple of Chan Masters in the history who were considered enlightened from this approach such as Xu-yun Chan master (虛雲禪師) and Yong-Jia Chan master (永嘉禪師).
- Nowadays, Mindfulness meditation is popular, which is a type of meditation that has similar practicing skills as the Sudden Chan meditation focusing only on calming the mind. It focuses on being intensely aware of your thoughts, senses and feeling in the moment without any judgment. However, it lacks the religious contents and the goal of attaining liberation from birth and death.