

Conceptions and Attitudes towards Contemplative Practice within the Early Traditions of Chan Buddhism

Mario Poceski

Associate Professor, Religion Department, University of Florida

Abstract

The article explores the main attitudes and approaches to meditative theory and praxis that developed within the early Chan movement, with a focus on the Tang 唐 era (618–907). The discussion covers the formative development of key models of Chan meditation, and their relationship to relevant canonical sources and the mainstream Buddhist thought of medieval China. It also deals with notable shifts in attitudes towards the nature and function of contemplative practice, as revealed in a variety of early Chan texts. That includes the treatment of meditation in the records of Bodhidharma (菩提達摩) and his disciples, the East Mountain tradition (*Dongshan famen* 東山法門), the Niutou school (牛頭宗), the Northern school (*Bei zong* 北宗), the Baotang school (保唐宗), the Heze school (荷澤宗), and the Hongzhou school (洪州宗). While in some instances we can discern an emphasis on articulating specific techniques or approaches to meditation, in other Chan records we can find calls, primarily articulated by advocates of radical forms of the “sudden approach,” to reject the formal practice of meditation. Between these opposing poles, we can also identify prominent efforts within influential Chan circles to balance a trenchant critique of unreflective reliance on skillful means on one hand, with the need to formulate effective strategies and ingenious programs of contemplative praxis that respond to the needs and abilities of actual practitioners. The article also considers these developments in relation to other conceptions of meditative theory and praxis formulated in medieval China outside of the Chan milieu, especially the Tiantai school’s (天台宗) comprehensive systematization of Buddhist meditation.

Keywords:

Chan, Tang Dynasty, Bodhidharma, Tiantai, Pure Land, Contemplation

初期禪宗對於修觀的概念及態度

Mario Poceski

美國佛羅里達州立大學宗教系助理教授

摘要

本篇文章探討唐代時期禪宗對於禪修理論及實踐的主要態度。研究的範圍包含禪修基本模式的形成、其與相關原典資料的關係及中古時期的中國佛教思想。本文藉由早期禪宗文獻的研究，指出禪宗對於修觀的本質及功能，在態度上有著重大的轉變。這些典籍包括菩提達摩與其弟子們、東山、牛頭、北禪、保唐、荷澤及洪州宗的禪修記載。本文指出有些禪宗典籍強調特定的禪修方法，然而有些卻反對制式的禪修形式，並且主張犀利的頓教。在兩者之間，我們也發現了有些重要的禪宗學派採取中道，避免過度偏向方便，並且尋求有效的禪觀實踐方法以便適應修行者的根機及需求。本文也探究在中國禪宗之外的其他相關禪修理論及實踐，特別是天台宗系統化的禪觀。

關鍵詞：

禪、唐朝、菩提達摩、天台、淨土、禪觀

Introduction

There has always been a close association between the Chan 禪 (Sōn/Zen/Thiền) tradition and the practice of meditation, even though meditation was also a broadly diffused and integral part of the soteriological schemes of other Buddhist traditions in China (and elsewhere). That remained the case despite the fact that some Chan masters made notable efforts to deconstruct the simple equation of Chan with meditation. In addition to a fairly pervasive ambivalence towards the deployment of conventional contemplative techniques, at certain historical points there were even some who rejected—rhetorically, at least—the practice of meditation altogether. This article explores, in fairly broad terms, the main attitudes and approaches to meditative theory and praxis that developed within the early Chan tradition, with a focus on the Tang 唐 era (618–907). It does not represent a detailed study of all relevant figures, texts, or traditions (a number of which has been examined in some detail by other scholars).

A case could be made for exploring the central themes broached in the following pages across a wider range of historical materials, but that is beyond the scope of a single article. Here I am primarily concerned with ascertaining the general pattern of engagement with contemplative practice observable among the main schools or lineages of Tang Chan. In addition to outlining the main types of attitudes and diverse modes of engagement with contemplative praxis within the fairly heterogeneous Chan movement, the article also represents a preliminary effort to relate the practice of meditation in Chan to other models of contemplative praxis that are representative of key segments of medieval Chinese Buddhism.

The article surveys the formative development of major models of meditation that developed within various Chan milieus, and their relationship to canonical sources and mainstream Buddhist thought before and during the Tang era. It covers a range of interpretative possibilities and notable shifts in attitudes towards the nature and function of contemplative practice, as revealed in a variety of sources produced by the main schools or lineages of Tang Chan. These include the varied treatments of meditative theory and praxis in the records of Bodhidharma (Putidamo 菩提達摩, c. late 5th or early 6th century) and his disciples, the East Mountain tradition (*Dongshan famen* 東山法門), the Niutou school (牛頭宗), the Northern school (*Bei zong* 北宗), the Baotang school (保唐宗), the Heze school (荷澤宗), and the Hongzhou school (洪州宗), plus various forms of recollection of the Buddha that were

current within early Chan. At the beginning there is also a very brief outline of the development of distinctive meditation techniques in post-Tang Chan.

In addition, the article tries to relate these developments within the Chan school to the broader understanding and deployment of meditation as a key category of Buddhist practice within medieval Chinese Buddhism, especially as evidenced in the extant works of Zhiyi 智顓 (538–597), the famous “founder” of the Tiantai school (天台宗). The discussion that follows will, I hope, help readers to ascertain and contextualize the central outlooks, ideals, and models of contemplative practice that were prevalent within the early Chan movement and which paved the way for the subsequent growth of later forms of spiritual cultivation we associate with Chan Buddhism. I also hope that the overview and analysis presented here will have an impact beyond the narrow milieu of academic specialists, and will introduce key aspects of Tang Chan to a broader audience.

Broader Historical and Scholarly Contexts

Arguably the most momentous growth of Chan as a distinct tradition within Chinese Buddhism unfolded during the Tang dynasty, which is thus often construed as the “golden age” of Chan. Accordingly, important Chan masters from the Tang era tend to occupy prominent places in both traditional and modern discussions of Chan history and teachings, even if their religious personas are often refracted or reimaged in light of later interpretative frameworks or ideological suppositions. Nonetheless, the main meditation techniques and soteriological paradigms commonly associated with Chan/Zen only assumed their mature or fully developed forms during the Song 宋 era (960–1279). The creation and broad diffusion of those distinctive techniques, which still shape the modern practice of Chan Buddhism, thus occurred during a period when the Chan School consolidated its position as the main tradition of elite Chinese Buddhism, with support from the Song state and important segments of its sociopolitical elite.¹ Since modern understandings of the intersections between Chan and meditation practice tend to be influenced by Song-era models and interpretations, perhaps it will be helpful to briefly consider some of the relevant aspects of Song Chan, before going into the complex and multilayered world of Tang Chan.

¹ For Song-era Chan, see Ishii (1987), Schlütter (2008), and Welter (2006, 2008).

Among the key features that came to characterize Chan in Song China were distinctive paradigms of contemplative praxis, especially the *kanhua* 看話 (“observing the critical phrase,” or perhaps simply “observing the word[s]”) technique of Chan meditation. The development of these paradigms was closely related to the creation of unique types of Chan literature, especially the various *gong’an* 公案 (“public case,” also known as *kōan* in Japanese) collections, represented by popular texts such as *Biyān lu* 碧巖錄 (*Blue Cliff Record*) and *Wumen guan* 無門關 (*Wumen’s Passage*). In addition, institutional changes that had lasting impact on the organization of monastic life, exemplified by the “pure rules” (*qinggui* 清規) that were meant to organize the daily activities and ritual observances of Chan monasteries, were gradually codified. These three developments—the codifications of new forms of contemplative praxis, literary genres, and institutional structures—were closely related to each other and had notable impact on the later history of Chan/Zen throughout East Asia.

The broad deployment of *kanhua* as a distinctive method of meditation practice was originally popularized by major Chan figures such as Dahui Zonggao 大慧宗杲 (1089–1163). Dahui, who was among the main representatives of the dominant Linji 臨濟 school (or lineage) of Song Chan, is well known for his promotion of the *kanhua* technique not only within monastic communities but also among the literati.² With some modifications, to this day this technique remains a central element of Chan Buddhism. Traditionally, this approach is contrasted with the practice of “silent illumination” (*mozha* 默照), which within the historical context of twelfth-century China was associated with the reinvented Caodong 曹洞 school, primarily represented by Hongzhi Zhengjue 宏智正覺 (1091–1157) and his followers. In contrast to the active approach championed by Dahui, which involved a single-minded focus on the critical part of a *gong’an*, the followers of silent illumination engaged in a form of quiet meditation that was meant to allow for the inherent buddha-nature to spontaneously manifest itself.³ The differences between these two approaches to the Chan path of practice and awakening became central issues in the oft-cited factional struggle that primarily pitted representatives of the Linji and Caodong lineages against each

² It is not totally clear if the *kanhua* technique was primarily meant for Dahui’s lay followers, which included a number of prominent literati, rather than his monastic disciples. See Sharf (2007, 231).

³ For more on silent illumination Chan, see Schlütter (2008, 144–74).

other.⁴ This split not only helped determine the contours of Song Chan, but also had notable ramifications for the subsequent development of Chan/Zen in China and the rest of East Asia.

The practice of *kanhua* Chan 看話禪 (Kanhwa Sŏn in Korean, and Kanna Zen in Japanese), also referred to as *huatou* Chan 話頭禪—which, arguably, turned out to be more influential in the long run than the silent illumination approach—was introduced into the Koryŏ 高麗 kingdom (918–1392) through the efforts of eminent Korean monks such as Pojo Chinul 普照智訥 (1158–1210),⁵ and remains the main meditation technique of Korean Buddhism.⁶ A similar technique was also transmitted to Japan during the Kamakura era 鎌倉時代 (1185–1333), where it became especially identified with the Rinzai (Linji) sect 臨濟宗 of Japanese Zen.⁷ Over the centuries this kind of contemplative practice has exerted pervasive impact on Buddhism in China and other parts of East Asia as a major method of spiritual cultivation. By extension, it has had notable influence on monastic life and training, theoretical discourse and doctrinal reflection, as well as esthetic sensibility and artistic creativity.

There has been a considerable amount of research on assorted historical, soteriological, and textual themes or issues that are related to the Song models of meditation and their later adaptations.⁸ There have also been important studies that either directly or in passing deal with the evolution of meditative theory and praxis within the context of the diverse Chan movement of the Tang era, although much more work remains to be done in that area. Scholars who have made notable contributions include Yanagida Seizan, Ishii Shūdō, Ran Yunhua (Jan Yun-hua), Philip Yampolsky, John Jorgensen, Jeffrey Broughton, John McRae, Bernard Faure, Robert Buswell, Albert Welter,

4 The various contexts and aspects of the conflict between Linji and Caodong Chan in Song China, including its religious, political, and economic underpinnings, are explored in considerable detail in Schlütter (2008).

5 For Chinul and his approach to Chan praxis, which relied heavily on Chinese models, see Buswell (1983).

6 For the practice of Kanhwa Sŏn in modern Korean Buddhism, see Buswell (1992, 149-202).

7 See Bodiford (1993, 144-9) and Kraft (1992, 35-7, 61-3, 98). For more recent formulations of meditation techniques based on kōans, see Mohr (2000) and Hori (2000).

8 For instance, see Buswell (1987), Schlütter (2008, 104-74), Araki (1969, 246-68), Du and Wei (1993, 431-64, 493-516), Levering (2010), Wu (2008, 40-1, 63-4), McRae (2003, 119-54), Foulk (1992), Bielefeldt (1988, 55-106, 151-9).

Morten Schlütter, Griffith Foulk, Robert Sharf, and Wendi Adamek, to mention a few. In their publications, to which this study is indebted, there is a wealth of information about key Chan figures, texts, concepts, and traditions, as well as translations of pertinent primary sources, many of which deal with or touch upon contemplative practice.

Overall, if we compare the status and character of meditation praxis during the Song and Tang eras, during the Song we have a more clear and unambiguous equation of Chan with formal meditation. Usually, that goes alongside significant efforts to highlight the uniqueness of Chan vis-à-vis other forms of Buddhism. We also find the development of specific techniques, such as *kanhua*, which are unique to the Chan School. To put it differently, within the Song context there is a clear-cut embrace of reliance on a specific method or technique, notwithstanding the frequent evocation of the sudden approach. Furthermore, there is a narrowing of soteriological options, as the practice of meditation becomes increasingly standardized and integrated into specific soteriological paradigms and institutional structures.

With those distinctions in mind, let us then try to ascertain how the convoluted and shifting relationship between the nascent Chan movement and contemplative practice gradually evolved within the historical contexts and religious landscapes of late medieval China, keeping in mind that the exact provenance of a number of early Chan records is open to debate. While some formative texts might claim to contain the teachings of notable Chan masters such as by Daoxin 道信 (580–651) and Hongren 弘忍 (601–674), we cannot really determine the precise connections between some of the extant sources and the actual teachings of the historical figures featured in them. Nonetheless, even if we cannot really arrive at precise knowledge about the meditation practices of some of the early Chan figures, we are still able to trace the broader developmental trajectories and draw attention to some of the recurring themes.

Bodhidharma’s “Wall Contemplation”

As indicated by its name, throughout its history the Chan school has generally been identified or described as a school of Buddhism that specializes in the practice of meditation. Its formative growth can be traced to earlier traditions of meditative praxis that flourished in medieval China during the period of disunion (third to sixth centuries). The enigmatic Indian monk Bodhidharma, who is traditionally evoked as the putative transmitter or “founder” of Chan in

China, was for all practical purposes an itinerant meditation teacher, whose teachings were grounded in the broader Mahāyāna tradition. This kind of identity is clearly reflected in the popular image of Bodhidharma sitting cross-legged, engaged in “wall contemplation” (*biguan* 壁觀), a somewhat ambiguous label that perhaps conveys a sense of solidity and stability, as well as integrative insight into the truth of emptiness (*kong* 空; Skt. *śūnyatā*).⁹

The construction of Bodhidharma’s familiar image as the first Chan patriarch in China was largely a retroactive attribution of a set of religious tropes to his quasi-historical persona.¹⁰ It was a central element of legendary lore that assumed distinctive narrative forms as it became incorporated into the evolving hagiographies of Bodhidharma, which in due course became incorporated into an incipient Chan “canon.” Among other things, this kind of iconic representation was meant to establish a key connection with India, which helped legitimize the nascent Chan movement by tracing its putative line of transmission back to the historical Buddha and his experience of supreme awakening under the *bodhi* tree.

In reality, there was no distinct Chan tradition, in any meaningful sense, during the time of the historical Bodhidharma, whose life is shrouded in mystery. Accordingly, the mystical lineage of Indian Chan patriarchs that linked him with the historical Buddha—a prominent feature of Chan texts composed in the “transmission of the lamp” (*chuandeng* 傳燈) genre—was essentially a creative work of historical and religious imagination. Nonetheless, some of the early texts associated with Bodhidharma and his disciples afford us glimpses into the broader religious milieu from which the early Chan movement evolved. They can also help us assess the understanding and role of meditation in that milieu.

The focus on contemplative practice is evident in the *Treatise on Two Entrances and Four Practices* (*Er ru si xing lun* 二入四行論), an oft-cited text traditionally attributed to Bodhidharma, which describes two main approaches to awakening and four specific practices.¹¹ This relatively brief text defines two main approaches, or entry points, to realization of the true nature of reality: the “entrance via principle” (*li ru* 理入) and the “entrance

⁹ For the variety of interpretations of this term, proposed by both pre-modern and modern scholars, see McRae (1986, 112-5).

¹⁰ See Faure (1993, 126-35) and McRae (2003, 24-8).

¹¹ For more on Bodhidharma and his text, see McRae (1986, 102-3) and Broughton (1999).

via practice” (*xing ru* 行入). The entrance via principle, presented as constituting a direct approach to spiritual awakening, is described as follows:

The entrance via principle involves becoming awakened to the essential truth by relying on the teachings.¹² One has to have deep faith that all living beings possess the same true nature. Being entirely covered up by external defilements and false thoughts, [the true nature] cannot reveal itself. However, if one were to abandon falsehood and return to the truth, unifying [the mind] in wall contemplation, then there are neither self nor other, and ordinary persons and sages are one and the same. Dwelling firmly, without any wobbling, one also does not follow [blindly] the written teachings. That is being in tacit agreement with the principle; without any discrimination, quiescent and unconditioned—that is called entrance via principle.¹³

理入者，謂藉教悟宗。深信含生同一真性，俱為客塵妄想所覆，不能顯了。若也舍妄歸真，凝住壁觀，無自無他，凡聖等一，堅住不移，更不隨於文教。此即與理冥符，無有分別，寂然無為，名之理入。

A key point here is the close connection between doctrinal formulations, as presented in the Buddhist canon, and the immediacy of direct insight into the absolute realm of reality. While, according to the text, the advanced practitioner does not get stuck in literal interpretations of canonical teachings, the actual realization associated with the entrance via principle (namely, the ultimate principle of reality) is very much in accord with canonical tenets and interpretations, which point to the ineffable and non-dual nature of reality. In contrast to the somewhat abstruse entrance via principle, the entrance via practice involves the cultivation of four different types of spiritual practice, which purportedly encompass the myriad practices described in canonical literature:

1. The practice of (accepting) requite for (past) enmity (*bao yuan xing* 報怨行);

¹² Here I am reading *jie* 藉 (rely on, lean on) instead of *ji* 籍 (books, records).

¹³ This translation is mine; find the original text in Yanagida (1969, 31-2). For a different translation (that I have consulted), see McRae (2003, 29). For an alternative version of the original Chinese text, see Bodhidharma’s biographical entry in *Xu gaoseng zhuan* 續高僧傳 16, T 2060, 50: 551c.

2. The practice of according with (external) circumstances (*sui yuan xing* 隨緣行);
3. The practice of not seeking anything (*wusuo jiu xing* 無所求行);
4. The practice of according with the Dharma (*cheng fa xing* 稱法行).¹⁴

Without going into too much detail about the text's vision of direct and progressive paths of spiritual cultivation, for our present purpose it will perhaps suffice to end this short section with a couple of brief points that are related to the subsequent emergence of a distinctive Chan tradition. First, here we can see an example of experimentation with developing innovative soteriological paradigms, and expressing them in new idioms. We also have a distinct focus on contemplative practice, which is understood in fairly broad terms. Moreover, these basic elements are grounded in an overarching conceptual framework that in the end can be traced back to the Buddhist canon.

Meditation in Medieval Chinese Buddhism

Given that the Chan school initially developed within a broader contemplative milieu, in order to make sense of the various Chan approaches to meditation described in the subsequent pages, it might be helpful to consider the general place and understanding of meditation in medieval Chinese Buddhism. Chinese interest in Buddhist meditation goes back to the early stages of the transmission of Buddhism into the Middle Kingdom. Such interest is already apparent during the second century CE, as evidenced by the translations and teachings of An Shigao 安世高 (d. 168 CE?). There we find discussions of a variety of meditative techniques, including mindfulness of breathing (*anpan nian* 安般念, also rendered as *anna panna* 安那般那; Skt. *ānāpānasmṛti*) and contemplation on the body's repulsiveness or impurity (*bujing guan* 不淨觀; Pāli: *asubha bhavana*; Skt. *aśubha-pratyavekṣā*).¹⁵

Early Chinese Buddhist texts also talk about other contemplative practices, such as cultivation of the four immeasurable mental states (*si wuliang xin* 四無量心) and recollection of the Buddha (*nianfo* 念佛). In many contexts, key aspects of meditation practice were integrated into a variety of ritual practices, including popular repentance rituals, which often had important visual

¹⁴ T 2060, 50: 551c; Yanagida (1969, 32).

¹⁵ See Zürcher ([1959] 2007, 32-4).

elements.¹⁶ Further prominent examples from the early medieval period come in the form of the contemplative practices that were practiced and promoted by Huiyuan 慧遠 (334–416) at his famous monastery on Lushan 廬山, which he integrated with cultic forms of worship centered on Amitābha Buddha.¹⁷

A comprehensive overview of the meditative practices of medieval Chinese Buddhism can be found in the writings of Zhiyi, the founder of the Tiantai school 天台宗.¹⁸ Zhiyi's wide-ranging schematization of meditative practice centered on the cultivation of calmness (*zhi* 止, also rendered as concentration; Skt. *śamatha*) and insight (*guan* 觀, also rendered as contemplation or discernment; Skt. *vipaśyanā*), the two broad categories and basic approaches to Buddhist meditation, which he brought together into an integrated whole. That is indicated by his frequent pairing or juxtaposition of the two terms, so that they came to function as a dynamic compound: calmness-insight (*zhiguan* 止觀). The two terms also feature prominently in the title of one of Zhiyi's most important works, the celebrated Tiantai meditation text *Great Calmness and Insight* (*Mohe zhiguan* 摩訶止觀), compiled in 594.¹⁹

Taking into account the spiritual needs and abilities of different kinds of practitioners, Zhiyi explained various kinds of contemplative practice. He also related them to important theoretical templates derived from the Buddhist canon, and in reference to the key Buddhist notion of expedient means or *upāya* (*fangbian* 方便, usually translated as “skillful” or “expedient means”). While in some practices the focus was on stillness and formlessness, others featured a variety of movements and forms. Zhiyi's broad and inclusive understanding of meditation, which interpreted *dhyāna* (Chan) in the general sense of *bhāvanā* (spiritual cultivation), was typical of his time.²⁰ It included various physical postures, ritual activities, and techniques of mental control

¹⁶ Eric Matthew Greene's dissertation (2012) provides an overview of the development of meditative practices during the period of disunion, up to the Sui dynasty.

¹⁷ Zürcher ([1959] 2007, 219-23).

¹⁸ As is well known, Zhiyi's disciple Guanding was instrumental in compiling and editing many of the key texts attributed to Zhiyi, including *Mohe zhiguan* 摩訶止觀, as well as formulating Tiantai orthodoxy. See Penkower (2000).

¹⁹ T 1911, vol. 46. For a study and a partial translation of this text, see Donner and Stevenson (1993).

²⁰ For more on various interpretive possibilities regarding the nature and scope of Buddhist mediation, especially within the East Asian context, see Sponberg (1986).

and purification. In addition to seated meditation and mindfulness of the Buddha, the complex assemblages of ritual components and meditative techniques described in his writings included invocation of the three refuges, offering of incense and flowers, making of prostrations, recitation of verses, confession of sins, repentance, and making of vows.

An example of Zhiyi's incorporation of various ritual elements into a particular type of contemplative practice can be found in his detailed description of the *Lotus samādhi* (*fahua sanmei* 法華三昧). Within Zhiyi's well-known systematization of meditation in terms of four basic forms of *samādhi* (*sanmei* 三昧), this type of contemplative technique belongs to the category of cultivating *samādhi* via partly walking and partly sitting (*banxing banzuo sanmei* 半行半坐三昧). There are two basic forms of this type of *samādhi*, both of which are inspired by canonical sources. The first is cultivated within the context of a twenty-one day retreat, and revolves around rigorous worship and single-minded recitation of the *Lotus Scripture*, along with a tightly-structured program of repentance rituals. It also involves alternating periods of sitting meditation and slow circumvallation of the altar while reciting the scripture. In the following passage, Zhiyi explains the proper method of reciting the scripture:

As to the method of reciting the scripture, you should make the sentences distinct and enunciate the sounds [of the words] clearly. [The recitation] should be neither lethargic nor hurried. Fix your attention on the text of the scripture, and do not stray from the passage at hand. You cannot make any mistakes. Next, you should quiet your mind and [endeavor to] comprehend the nature of the voice as being like an echo in an empty valley. Even though the sound cannot be apprehended, the mind [is able] to illuminate the meaning of every line; the words [themselves] are vocalized clearly. Visualize this sound of the Dharma as spreading throughout the universe [dharmadhatu, also rendered as "realm of reality"], making offerings to the Three Treasures....²¹

夫誦經之法，當使文句分明，音聲辯了，不寬不急，繫緣經中文句，如對文不異，不得謬誤。當次靜心，了音聲性，如空谷嚮。雖不得音聲，而心歷歷，照諸句義，言詞辯了。運此法音，充滿法界，供養三寶。

²¹ *Fahua sanmei chayi* 法華三昧懺儀 (*Lotus Samādhi Repentance Ritual*), T 1941, 46: 954a; this translation is adapted from Stevenson (1986, 69).

This kind of attention to detail and concern with proper procedure is typical of contemplative practices and ritual observances that have fixed form and structure, of which there is a rich array within the Tiantai tradition (and even more within Chinese Buddhism as a whole). They serve as expedient means that discipline the body and purify the mind. As they gradually bring about cognitive restructuring of the practitioner's consciousness, they purportedly lead to higher forms of awareness and insight. In contrast, there are also the formless or unstructured modes of meditative practice, which echo the shapeless and ineffable nature of reality. At the top of Zhiyi's ordering of the main approaches to meditative praxis was the "perfect and sudden practice of calmness and insight" (*yuandun zhiguan* 圓頓止觀). In Guanding's 灌頂 (561–632) preface to Zhiyi's prodigious *Great Calmness and Insight*, that approach is described as follows:

The perfect and sudden [practice of calmness and insight] from the very beginning takes the true nature of reality as its object. Being identical with the mean, within it there is nothing that is not true reality. When one's mind connects with the realm of reality and the realm of reality is present within a single thought, then there is no sight or smell that is not the Middle Way. The realm of self, the realm of Buddhas, and the realm of living creatures are all also like that.... There is only one unadulterated reality; there is nothing else outside of that reality. That the nature of all things is quiescent is called calmness. That things are quiescent and yet illuminated is called insight.²²

圓頓者，初緣實相，造境即中，無不真實。繫緣法界，一念法界，一色一香，無非中道。己界及佛界、眾生界亦然……純一實相，實相外更無別法。法性寂然名止，寂而常照名觀。

At the most refined level, this kind of subtle and formless meditation has no fixed form or procedure. Its object of meditation is no other than the true nature of reality (*shixiang* 實相). In the context of Zhiyi's aforementioned systematization of meditation in terms of four kinds of *samādhi*, this approach is exemplified by the *sui zi yi* 隨自意 (at one's will) type of contemplative practice, which eschews all specific forms, patterns, or modes of activity. That can be understood as a formless or unstructured form of meditation that implies a sense of spontaneity and freedom, and is not linked with any of the

²² *Mohe zhiguan* 摩訶止觀 1, T 1911, 46: 1c-2a; quoted (with minor revisions) in Poceski (2009, 151); cf. Donner and Stevenson (1993, 112-3).

formal techniques of sitting meditation. Within Zhiyi's fourfold scheme, this kind of open-ended and free-flowing practice is allocated to the category of "neither walking nor sitting" (*feixing feizuo* 非行非坐) *samādhi*.²³

Within the Tiantai system, meditation—along with other forms of spiritual cultivation—can be approached in terms of two broad categories. The two categories can be framed in reference to the familiar dichotomy of principle (*li* 理) and phenomena (*shi* 事), which is a common feature of Chinese philosophical discourse, both within and outside of Buddhism. First, there is the category of phenomenal practices, which involve various formal procedures or external forms of practice, including ritual acts such as prostrations, circumambulations, and making of offerings. Then there is the category of noumenal practice, which dispenses with all rituals, invocations, and the like, and instead involves direct contemplation of the non-dual nature of mind and reality.

The two approaches, noumenal and phenomenal, or form-based and formless, are not mutually exclusive. Rather, they are complementary and need to be deployed in accord with specific circumstances, and in light of the abilities of actual practitioners. At the same time, they imply a sense of hierarchy, at least in certain contexts. There is an important sense in which an approach based on the essential principle of reality is superior, inasmuch as it accords better with the formless and signless nature of ultimate reality. However, there is an important caveat that is reiterated by Zhiyi: such subtle and superior approach is also only suitable for advanced practitioners.

For the rest—which in practical terms means just about everybody—it is necessary to make use of structured or phenomenal forms of practice. Consequently, Zhiyi wrote a meditation manual for beginners, the *Tiantai xiao zhiguan* 天台小止觀. This popular text provides fairly basic instructions about specific techniques and the practical aspects of meditation practice, including proper posture and healing.²⁴ Notwithstanding the abundant variety of contemplative practices described by Zhiyi, they were all organized according to a set of core principles. At the center is the basic Tiantai notion

²³ See Stevenson (1986, 75-84). This excellent publication presents a comprehensive survey of the four types of *samādhi*.

²⁴ T 1915, vol. 46. For a translation, see Saso (2000). For a detailed study of the text, see Sekiguchi (1974). Additional information about the classical models of Tiantai meditation can also be found in Sekiguchi (1969, especially 206-81).

of the emptiness of mind and phenomena, which supposedly leads to a realization of the essential principle (or true nature) of ultimate reality.²⁵

East Mountain Tradition

The East Mountain tradition was centered at two monastic communities, located on adjacent mountains in present-day Hubei 湖北. It was led by Daoxin and Hongren, two locally prominent monks who subsequently came to be recognized as the fourth and fifth Chinese Chan patriarchs (*zu* 祖, also translated as ancestor). From the extant records we can surmise that both masters advocated contemplative and disciplined monastic lifestyle, and paid special attention to the formal practice of meditation.²⁶ The meditation practices taught by Daoxin and Hongren reflected canonical influences. Accordingly, notwithstanding their innovative features, they can be interpreted in relation to other Mahāyāna types of meditation that were popular in China at the time.

According to the *Lengqie shizi ji* 楞伽師資記 (*Record of the Teachers and Disciples of the Laṅkāvatāra*), an important chronicle of the early Chan movement, Daoxin taught the “one practice *samādhi*” (*yixing sanmei* 一行三昧),²⁷ which was based on the *Wenshu shuo jing* 文殊說經 (*Scripture Spoken by Mañjuśrī*). The scripture defines this type of *samādhi* (meditative absorption) as follows: “The realm of reality (*dharmadhātu*) only has one characteristic; to make the realm of reality the object [of meditation] is called one practice *samādhi*” (法界一相，繫緣法界，是名一行三昧).²⁸ The “one characteristic” alluded to in the text is the absence of all characteristics (or marks): namely, the emptiness or signlessness of the realm of reality. This kind of meditation practice was similar to Zhiyi’s “constantly sitting *samādhi*” (*chang zuo sanmei* 常坐三昧), one of the four basic meditative approaches

²⁵ Stevenson (1986, 84-5).

²⁶ Obviously, from the limited sources at our disposal we cannot ascertain exactly the context and extent to which these techniques were put into practice. Nor can we precisely determine the discrepancies between the rhetorical postures and ideological standpoints intimated by these and other early Chan texts, and the actual practices of the monastic communities that produced or disseminated them. Notwithstanding those limitations, the available sources provide valuable information about the intersections between the nascent Chan movement and the formal practice of meditation.

²⁷ For this *samādhi* and its place in early Chan, see Faure (1986, 105-9).

²⁸ T 232, 8: 731a; Cleary (1991, 48); Faure (1986, 100).

described in the Tiantai taxonomy of “four types of *samādhi*,” which was based on the same scripture.²⁹ While the Chan text shows signs of Tiantai influence, it also introduces new elements and perspectives.

Ru dao an xin yao fangbian famen 入道安心要方便法門, the main text attributed to Daoxin, starts by presenting the main elements of his teaching, while also explicitly evoking scriptural authority.³⁰ The text establishes the mind as the central focus of both doctrinal reflection and contemplative practice:

According to my essential teachings, based on the *Laṅkāvatāra Scripture*, the mind of all Buddhas is the foremost [truth]. Moreover, based on the *Wenshu shuo jing*, one practice *samādhi* denotes that the mind that is mindful of the Buddha is no other than the Buddha, whereas the [mind that is filled with] deluded thoughts is the [mind of] ordinary person.³¹

我此法要，依《楞伽經》，諸佛心第一。又依《文殊說般若經》，一行三昧，即念佛心是佛，妄念是凡夫。

The close connection between Daoxin’s “Chan” teachings and certain scriptural doctrines is among the prominent features of the text, which is full of allusions and quotations from a wide range of canonical sources. Later the text equates being mindful of the Buddha with “not thinking of anything” (*wusuo nian* 無所念), and asserts the essential identity of the mind and the Buddha.³² The latter is a prominent doctrinal stance traceable to several well-known scriptures, including the *Huayan Scripture* (華嚴經), and is also featured in numerous Chan texts. The Chan adept’s mind becomes pacified (*anxin* 安心), we are told, when he realizes this truth.

Much of Daoxin’s discussion of Chan theory and praxis is infused with doctrinal tenets and tends to be somewhat abstract. Nonetheless, he also

²⁹ For more on this *samādhi* in Tiantai, see Stevenson (1986, 54-8); see also the relevant discussion in the previous section.

³⁰ For Daoxin and his *Ru dao an xin yao fangbian famen* 入道安心要方便法門, a version of which is included in *Lengqie shizi ji*, see Chappell (1983). For the Chinese text, see T 2837, 85: 1286c-89b; and Yanagida (1971, 186-268); Yanagida’s volume also includes a Japanese translation.

³¹ *Lengqie shizi ji*, T 2837, 85: 1286c; Yanagida (1971, 186); cf. Chappell (1983, 107). Note that there are slight discrepancies between the T and Yanagida’s version of the text; my translation follows the second.

³² *Lengqie shizi ji*, T 2837, 85: 1287a; Yanagida (1971, 192); Chappell (1983, 108).

discusses the cultivation of calmness (S: *śamatha*; C: *zhi* 止) and insight (S: *vipaśyanā*; C: *guan* 觀), the two main categories of meditative praxis according to standard canonical formulations.³³ He also states that contemplative training involves the formal practice of sitting meditation (*zuochan* 坐禪), which is explicitly mentioned twelve times in the text. Daoxin's text even provides brief information about proper posture and other physical aspects of meditation practice. Here is a part of that section, which on the whole reads as an excerpt from a meditation manual:

When you initially begin the training of sitting in meditation and observing the mind, you should sit alone in a single place. First, make your body erect and sit properly, making your clothes loose-fitting and untightening your belt. Relax and loosen your limbs. Massage yourself seven or eight times.³⁴

初學坐禪看心，獨坐一處，先端身正坐，寬衣解帶，放身縱體，自按摩七八翻。

Furthermore, in *Chuan fa bao ji* 傳法寶紀 (*Record of the Dharma Treasure's Transmission*), an early Chan text discovered in Dunhuang 敦煌, we find Daoxin encouraging his disciples to engage in the diligent practice of sitting meditation over extended periods of time, to the exclusion of other practices, including the study of scriptures.

Make effort and be diligent in your sitting [meditation], for sitting is the fundamental [part of your practice]. If you can do it for three or five years, getting a mouthful of food to stave off starvation and illness, then just close the door and sit [in meditation]. Do not read the scriptures or talk with anyone. If you can do that, then sooner or later you will find it to be effective.³⁵

努力勤坐，坐為根本，能作三五年，得一口食塞飢瘡，即閉門坐。莫讀經，莫共人語。能如此者，久久堪用。

Among the central themes of Daoxin's discourse about contemplative practice is the basic idea that, since Buddhahood and the nature of reality are formless and transcend signs, in the final analysis there is no specific object or fixed

³³ See Yanagida (1971, 205) and Chappell (1983, 110).

³⁴ *Lengqie shizi ji*, T 2837, 85: 1289a; translation loosely based on Chappell (1983, 119).

³⁵ Yanagida (1971, 380); translation adapted from McRae (1986, 262).

method of meditation. Accordingly, the Chan practitioner is advised to be constantly mindful of reality (*shixiang* 實相), namely the emptiness and interpenetration of all phenomena, while sitting upright (*duanzuo* 端坐). More generally, the mind should be devoid of all objects of thought, which Daoxin equates with “mindfulness of Buddha” (*nianfo*). Since Buddha is not apart from mind, mindfulness of Buddha is no different from mindfulness of mind. The realization of this truth is supposed to lead to the mind’s pacification (*anxin* 安心).³⁶

Furthermore, in order to be effective, a method of practice needs to be grounded in the truth of awakening.³⁷ Daoxin’s text also advocates the analogous practice of “guarding the one” (*shou yi* 守一), which shows Daoist influences and can be related to native Chinese meditation techniques. In the Daoist context, the “one” can be interpreted as the formless and ineffable Dao— but also, in different contexts, as an anthropomorphized supreme deity— and the goal of practice is union with it.

Similar ideas about meditation are also attributed to Hongren, who is perhaps best known for his practice of “guarding the mind” (*shouxin* 守心), the main source for which is *Xiu xin yao lun* 修心要論 (*Treatise on the Essentials of Mental Cultivation*).³⁸ This practice involves constant awareness or mindfulness of the true mind or buddha-nature (*foxing* 佛性) within oneself, without any wayward thoughts. Eventually the practitioner is presumed to have a direct experience of the buddha-nature, accompanied by the disappearance of false thinking and delusion. The basic postulate here is one of the central premises of the buddha-nature theory: spiritual perfection is intrinsically present within the mind. Accordingly, all one needs to do is make it possible for the innate buddha-nature to manifest itself. Because that is easier said than done, practitioners are exhorted to diligently apply themselves to meditation practice.³⁹

In his text Hongren also recommends other meditative exercises, which presumably are understood as forms of *upāya*. First, there is a simple meditative exercise of visualizing the orb of the sun, which is based on a practice described in *Guan wuliang shou fo jing* 觀無量壽佛經 (*Scripture on Contemplating the Buddha of Infinite Life*). In addition to being a well-known Pure Land scripture, this canonical text was also popular in contemplative

³⁶ Yanagida (1971, 192); Cleary (1991, 49).

³⁷ Chappell (1983, 97-8).

³⁸ For *Xiu xin yao lun*, see McRae (1986, 121-38).

³⁹ McRae (1986, 136).

circles. Then there is a more advanced practice of awareness of the unenlightened mental activity of the discriminating mind, which purportedly leads to a gradual cessation of ignorant or deluded thinking.⁴⁰ Finally, there is an exercise in which the meditator visualizes the Chinese character for “one” (which is simply a straight horizontal line), located at the lower part of empty space, which is meant to help engender an expansive state of mind.⁴¹

Northern School

Among the salient features of early Chan texts, including *Er ru si xing lun* and *Xiu xin yao lun*, is the frequent evocation of the central Mahāyāna concept of *upāya*, exemplifying a sense of creative tension within the Chan tradition. On one side, there is the basic Buddhist notion of inherent perfection—associated with the buddha-nature doctrine—that postulates an immaculate substratum of buddhahood at the core of human existence. At the same time, there is an open acknowledgement that spiritual effort and deployment of specific techniques are pragmatic prerequisites for spiritual progress and the eventual attainment of awakening. On the whole, we can surmise that within early Chan there was a marked tendency to interpret meditation practices, along with other methods or techniques of spiritual cultivation, as particular forms of *upāya*, and to highlight the importance of utilizing the appropriate type of *upāya*.

The idea of *upāya*, especially within the context of the practice of meditation, continued to play an important role within the Northern school.⁴² That can be seen in *Dasheng wu fangbian* 大乘五方便 (*Five Expedient Means of Mahāyāna*; usually abbreviated to *Five Expedient Means*), a once-lost text associated with the Northern school that was recovered in Dunhuang.⁴³ As its title suggests, this text elucidates five forms of *upāya*, each of which is accorded a separate section and is associated with a specific canonical text:

⁴⁰ McRae (1986, 137).

⁴¹ Faure (1986, 114-5).

⁴² The designation “Northern school” is widely used in both traditional sources and modern scholarship, although it need to be qualified in as much as the monks associated with it did not identified themselves as belonging to a “school” with such name. The designation was initially popularized by Shenhui, in the context of his attacks of what he named the Northern school.

⁴³ T 2834, vol. 85; listed under an alternative title, *Dasheng wusheng fangbian men* 大乘無生方便門. For more on *Wu fangbian*, see McRae (1986, 171-96, 218-30).

1. Comprehensive explanation of the essence of buddhahood—*Mahāyāna Treatise on the Awakening of Faith* (*Dasheng qi xin lun* 大乘起信論);
2. Opening the gates of wisdom and sagacity—*Lotus Scripture* (*Miao fa lianhuan jing* 妙法蓮華經);
3. Manifesting the inconceivable truth—*Vimalakīrti Scripture* (*Weimojie jing* 維摩詰經);
4. Elucidation of the true nature of phenomena—*Scripture of Siyi* (*Siyi fantian suowen jing* 思益梵天所問經);⁴⁴
5. The naturally unobstructed path of emancipation—*Huayan Scripture*.⁴⁵

An emphasis on contemplative praxis, including the practice of sitting meditation, is also evident in other records associated with the Northern school, such as *Yuan ming lun* 圓明論 (*Treatise on Perfect Illumination*).⁴⁶ Most of them can be traced to previously-lost medieval manuscripts discovered in Dunhuang, which revolutionized the study of early Chan history. In important respects, there is a sense of continuity with the teachings of Daoxin and Hongren. That perhaps is not surprising, given that monks associated with the Northern school saw themselves as direct successors of the East Mountain tradition; they were also perceived as such by most of their contemporaries.

Yuan ming lun asserts that there are many approaches to cultivating the path that leads to awakening, which it divides into three main categories of teachings: gradual, sudden, and perfect.⁴⁷ Furthermore, according to Northern school texts, the observance of moral precepts, including monastic regulations, is a basic prerequisite for meditation practice. This is probably to be expected, given the close connections between the Northern school and the Vinaya tradition that flourished in Tang China. The same can also be said of other traditional practices, including the study of Buddhist doctrine, although empty rituals and other superficial practices are not to be encouraged.⁴⁸

But ultimately, according to the *Guanxin lun* 觀心論 (*Treatise on the Contemplation of Mind*),⁴⁹ it is the contemplation of mind (*guanxin* 觀心)

⁴⁴ T 586, vol. 15; translated by Kumārajīva (402), in four fascicles. While, arguably, this is a somewhat obscure text, the other four texts listed here were among the best-known canonical works in medieval China.

⁴⁵ See McRae (1986, 219).

⁴⁶ See Shiina (1971, 135-6).

⁴⁷ See McRae (1986, 151).

⁴⁸ McRae (1986, 228-9).

⁴⁹ T 2833, vol. 85.

that constitutes the most quintessential and direct approach to the realization of spiritual awakening and attainment of buddhahood. This kind of contemplation is the single teaching that encompasses all practices.⁵⁰ In light of that, it is not surprising that the term “contemplation of mind” (or perhaps “mind contemplation”) is featured prominently in this significant text, probably composed by Shenxiu 神秀 (606?–706), the eminent leader of the Northern school.

According to sources preserved in *Dao fan qu sheng xin jue* 導凡趣聖心決, an anthology of Northern school teachings recovered in Dunhuang, among the specific contemplative practices discussed by Shenxiu is “contemplation of the external” (*wai guan* 外觀). That is a beginners’ practice that entails awareness of the various sensory perceptions of the external world. Within such conceptual schemes, the practice of meditation implies a sense of gradual advancement, and the object of contemplation may change in accord with the appropriate level or stage of practice. At a higher level, there is the internal practice of contemplation of emptiness.

In *Dao fan qu sheng xin jue*, the main reason why one should start with contemplation of the external is explained as follows:

If you wish to cultivate contemplation, you should start first with contemplation of the external. That is necessary because the external sensory realms constitute the causes and conditions of the generated mind, the locus from which [all] vexations spring forth. In addition, because ordinary people’s willpower is shallow, if one were to guide them to directly enter into the profound and sublime realm [of the absolute], it is going to be difficult for them to advance [with their practice].

若要修觀，要須從外觀。所以須者，以諸外境，是生心因緣，起煩惱處。又來凡夫志力粗淺，若令即入深勝處，恐難進趣。

Having explained why the practitioner should start with it, the text then goes on to explain what is involved in this kind of contemplative practice:

⁵⁰ T 2009, 48, 366c19-27; in this version, the text is listed under the title *Po xiang lun* 破相論 (*Treatise on the Obliteration of Characteristics*) and is included in a larger compilation titled *Xiaoshi liumen* 小室六門, which also includes five other texts. See also T 2833, 85: 1271c14-20; McRae (1986, 207); Faure (1997, 60-1).

Therefore, those who start with contemplation of the external should understand that all phenomena are, fundamentally and in their essential nature, the same and without any distinctive characteristics. All phenomena exist only as illusory creations, engendered by the beginningless perfuming [of ignorance], without having any real essence. Since all phenomena are the same and are like illusory creations, in principle their origin cannot [be described in terms of] existence and nonexistence, birth and death, positive and negative, long and short. They are only [like] illusions [engendered by] beginningless ignorance.⁵¹

所以先從外觀者，須知諸法本來體性平等，無差別相。今所有諸法，但是無始薰習，因緣幻起，無有實體。此法平等，因緣幻起，理本非是有無生滅、是非長短，只為無始無明迷惑。

The contemplation of emptiness purportedly leads to the realization of a non-dual and undifferentiated state of mind, in which there is transcendence of the subject-object dichotomy.⁵² This sequence implies a sense of gradual progression, from a more basic to a more refined form of contemplative practice. At a basic level, *Wu fangbian* promotes sitting in the lotus position (*jiejiafu zuo* 結跏趺坐) and being mindful of the Buddha (*nianfo*).⁵³ In addition, it advocates engaging in the practices of “viewing the mind” (*kan xin* 看心) and “viewing afar” (*yuan kan* 遠看).⁵⁴ The first involves an inward focus of attention (hence the notion of viewing or gazing at), and the object of contemplation is no other than the true or transcendental mind.⁵⁵ Regarding the second, the text explains: “View afar to the front, not residing in the myriad sensory realms, holding the body upright and just illuminating, making the true essence of reality distinct and clear.”⁵⁶ The same procedure is repeated by looking to the rear, both sides, facing upwards, facing downwards, and in all directions at once. When thus viewing, the text explains, “nothing is viewed.”

⁵¹ Chinese text available in Yanagida Seizan (1963, 49), and online (in simplified characters) at <http://chan.bailinsi.net/2000/3/2000305.htm> (accessed 10/23/2013). The translation is loosely based on McRae (1986, 215), who also references Pelliot 3559, 17:9/391f.

⁵² McRae (1986, 216).

⁵³ T 2834, 85: 1273b29-c3.

⁵⁴ See, for instance, T 2834, 85: 1273c4-6.

⁵⁵ For a discussion of *kan xin*, see Faure (1997, 58-9, 61-2, 64-7).

⁵⁶ McRae (1986, 173).

When done properly, the act of clear and unobstructed viewing (or observing) is done by the true or awakened mind (*jue xin* 覺心), and the ultimate object of nondiscriminatory perception is reality itself. When truly viewing in accord with the principle of reality, there is no object of perception: it is the awakened mind itself that does the act of viewing.⁵⁷ Furthermore, the technique of “viewing afar,” which is described in terms of the popular metaphor of a bright mirror that clearly reflects all images without any distortions, can be deployed in the context of various activities and situations.⁵⁸

Niutou School’s Qualified Critique of Meditation

During the middle part of the eight century, the Niutou school came to be perceived as a viable alternative to the Northern school, which in some contexts could be described as the dominant tradition of Chan at the time. With the rise of the Niutou school we can observe a shift in attitudes within the Chan movement, including a rise of equivocal or disapproving stances towards conventional forms of contemplative practice. There are some indications that such attitudes already began with the Niutou school’s “founder,” Niutou Farong 牛頭法融 (594–657), even though he was primarily known as a meditation specialist. Later generations of monks affiliated with the school dissociated themselves from the kinds of contemplative practices that at the time were taught by other Chan masters, including the disciples of Shenxiu. According to some indicators, within the Niutou school’s milieu there was an apparent rejection of formal sitting meditation, at least of the kind that was promoted in the early Chan texts discussed above.

At the same time, the hagiographical records of noted Niutou teachers indicate that they had preference for a quiet and contemplative way of life, implying that they were not necessarily averse to the practice of meditation. Shiina Kōyū 椎名宏雄 has suggested that the Niutou School’s critique of meditative practice was meant to underscore subtle differences and interpretative distinctions between its model of contemplative praxis and the meditative practices advocated by masters associated with the Northern

⁵⁷ McRae (1986, 172-4, 231-2; 2003, 52-3).

⁵⁸ McRae (1986, 229, 231).

school.⁵⁹ The highlighting of those kinds of differences implied the formulation of a distinctive soteriological paradigm.

These kinds of positioning were presumably related to the Niutou school's efforts to establish its distinctive identity within the larger Chan movement, at a key juncture in its historical development. Namely, with the emergence of clearer awareness of Niutou Chan as a distinct lineage or tradition, leading figures associated with it perhaps sought to establish its identity as a viable alternative to both the Northern and the Southern schools. It is important to note that at that time, the Southern school was coming to the fore, in large part due to Heze Shenhui's 荷澤神會 (684–758) sectarian and self-serving efforts, which elicited a variety of responses, many of them quite negative.

Accordingly, the general tentativeness and the specific critiques articulated by leading Niutou monks need not be understood as an outright rejection of the practice of meditation. Instead, it might be more appropriate to view them as arguments for the adoption of a more refined and qualitatively different approach to contemplative practice. That also needs to be understood in relation to the Niutou school's overall vision of a Chan path of practice and realization, which was largely grounded in the philosophical concepts and doctrinal tenets of the Middle Way (*zhong guan* 中觀; Skt. *Madhyamika*) school, especially its teaching about emptiness and dependent origination.

The application of the Middle Way dialectic to the realm of inner exploration and contemplative engagement, one of the hallmarks of Niutou Chan, is readily observable in the *Wuxin lu* 無心論 (*Treatise on No-mind*). Although of somewhat obscure provenance, this text uncovered at Dunhuang probably contains ideas that had broad currency within Niutou circles. In it we find a rejection of the mind's substantive existence, in the way it is usually conceptualized in mainstream Mahāyāna discourse. After informing its anonymous interlocutor that “there is no [substantive] mind,” even though we are all able to see, hear, feel, and know, the author explains how one comes to realize the mind's fundamental absence or emptiness.

You should only look carefully and inquisitively. What kind of appearance does the mind have? If there is a mind that can be apprehended, is that [really] the mind, or is it not the mind? Can it perchance be located within, outside, or in the middle? In this way, after inquiring in these three locations, one's search for the mind [is unsuccessful and] leads to nothing whatsoever. Even if one were to

⁵⁹ Shiina (1971, 136-7).

look everywhere else, there is still nothing to be found. Therefore, you should know that as no-mind.⁶⁰

汝但子細推求看，心作何相貌？其心復可得，是心不是心。為復在內，為復在外，為復在中間？如是三處推求，覓心了不可得，乃至於一切處求覓，亦不可得，當知即是無心。

In contrast to the buddha-nature theory, which in some interpretative frameworks is taken to postulate a pure essence in the mind of each person that constitutes the seed of buddhahood, the Middle Way doctrine asserts that there is no real or essential mind that can be known or realized. Accordingly, various forms of mental cultivation that aim to purify the mind, or to shed light on its true nature, are largely off-mark, inasmuch as they mistakenly imagine or reify the mind, and wrongly make it the object of meditative inquiry. Given that, according to the same text, the utmost principle is wordless and the great way is without any characteristics, the cultivation of no-mind (*wuxin* 無心) itself is the right approach to practice.⁶¹ In a way, one is left with the practice of non-practice.

This invocation of the notion of no-mind is similar to the kinds of ideas we find in some Chan texts associated with prominent Hongzhou school figures, including Dazhu Huihai 大珠慧海 (fl. 8th c.), Baizhang Huaihai 百丈懷海 (749–814), and Huangbo Xiyun 黃檗希運 (d. 850?).⁶² There we come across the argument that no-mind, or similar forms of objectless awareness, should not be reified or attached to. Where there is any kind of thinking, or even a subtle form of awareness of no-mind, that is not a genuine state of no-mind. While that does not necessarily preclude the practice of sitting meditation, it is apparent that in the Niutou school's milieu—as well as, as we will see below, in that of the Hongzhou school—we are not dealing with conventional types of meditation practice, especially those that rely on mechanical application of a fixed technique. Rather, the focus seems to be on a subtle type of awareness or discernment of reality, understood in terms of the emptiness doctrine, which can be cultivated outside, as well as within, conventional forms of practice.

Some of the central perspectives of Niutou Chan are presented in the *Jueguan lun* 絕觀論 (*Discourse on the Transcendence of Cognition*). This is

60 T 2831, 85: 1269b.

61 T 2831, 85: 1269a.

62 For Baizhang's ideas on this and related topics, see Poceski (2007, 207-15). Huangbo is discussed later in this article.

another Dunhuang text of somewhat uncertain provenance, traditionally attributed to Farong.⁶³ Its title, which has multiple connotations, can also be translated as *Discourse on the Abandonment of Contemplation*. When rendered this way, it conveys a sense of abandonment of conventional forms of contemplation. Commonplace forms of contemplative practice are not to be relied upon because, in the final analysis, they involve mundane states of mind. In contrast, the realization of reality involves transcendence of everyday patterns of thought, which perhaps can be understood to be tantamount to a thoroughgoing cognitive restructuring.

While the treatment of spiritual cultivation in the *Jueguan lun* tends to be somewhat abstract, in the text we also find a critique of conventional notions about the “pacification of mind” (discussed above), which aims at calming the mind by emptying it of all contents. Instead, the *Jueguan lun* holds that what is needed is an insight into the mind’s intrinsic emptiness or insubstantiality. In the same text we also find advocacy of no-mind and no-thought (*wunian* 無念). “If there is no-thought, then there is no-mind; when there is no-mind, there is true awakening” (無念即無心，無心即真道), states the text.⁶⁴ In the end, awakening is not a matter of gradual purification or pacification of mind. Nor does it require doing anything special, or making a self-conscious effort to attain something. Rather, it involves abandonment of all seeking, discriminative perception, and conceptualization—a total act of letting go, without a self-centered awareness of doing so—as well as transformative insight into the true nature of reality.⁶⁵

Rejection of Formal Meditation Practice

Besides the Niutou school’s doctrinal and soteriological repositioning, during the mid-eighth century in certain Chan circles we start to see unequivocal rejections of traditional conceptions of meditative practice. For the most part these rejections are expressed in a lofty and absolutist language, and are linked with the kinds of staunch forms of rhetorical posturing that came to be associated with radical proponents of the “sudden” (*dun* 頓) approach. While the notion of suddenness was primarily associated with the experience of awakening (*wu* 悟), it was also applied to the realm of practice (*xing* 行),

⁶³ For the original text, see Suzuki (1980). For a brief study of the text, see McRae (1983, 211-7) and Yanagida (1980).

⁶⁴ See McRae (1983, 212).

⁶⁵ See McRae (1983, 215-6).

usually in a manner that was critical or dismissive of all “gradual” (*jian* 漸) practices. Prime examples of such tendencies can be found in the extant records of Shenhui, who took it upon himself to redraw the parameters of Chan orthodoxy, in part by establishing the relatively obscure Huineng 慧能 (638–713) as the “sixth Chan patriarch,” and himself as the main successor of Huineng.

Shenhui is well known for his popularization of the teaching of sudden awakening (*dunwu* 頓悟), which became one of the hallmarks of the classical Chan tradition. His introduction of this kind of teaching, however, needs to be understood within a broader historical context. To a large degree, the pertinent historical background was dominated by Shenhui’s aggressive campaigns against the Northern school, whose leading figures were presented by him as heretics (of sorts), who had strayed from the right path. Among his key critiques of the Northern school’s teachings, which also included several doctrinal points, was his negative assessment of its approach to meditation practice. That is summarized by the four well-known statements that he (perhaps somewhat disingenuously) attributed to Shenxiu: “freezing the mind to enter *samādhi*; stopping the mind to view purity; activating the mind for outward illumination; and concentrating the mind for inner realization” (凝心入定，住心看淨，起心外照，攝心內證).⁶⁶

However, Shenhui went beyond offering a critique of the Northern school’s approach to meditation. He apparently ended up rejecting the very notion of formal practice of meditation altogether, at least at a rhetorical level.⁶⁷ He went on to radically redefine the practice of “sitting meditation” (*zuo chan* 坐禪) in symbolic (and perhaps largely meaningless) terms, using the technique of symbolic exegesis (*guan xin shi* 觀心釋; sometimes also called “contemplative interpretation”) that was popular in early Chan circles. That is evident in his response to a question about sitting meditation, in which Shenhui explains:

As to what you call sitting, when there is no rising of thoughts—that is sitting. As to what you call meditation, when one perceives the original nature—that is meditation. Therefore, I do not teach people to sit physically, or to try to stop the mind and enter *samādhi*.⁶⁸

⁶⁶ *Putidamo nanzong ding shifei lun* 菩提達摩南宗定是非論, in Yang (1996, 29–31); translation from McRae (1987, 246–7).

⁶⁷ McRae (1987, 249).

⁶⁸ *Putidamo nanzong ding shifei lun*, in Yang (1996, 31).

今言坐者，念不起為坐；今言禪者，見本性為禪。所以不教人坐身，住心入定。

It seems that Shenhui's rejection of meditation practice was primarily shaped by his sectarian agenda to discredit the Northern school, which was well known for its advocacy of meditation practice. That went together with his desire to establish himself as the main patriarch or representative of the orthodox Chan tradition, which he traced back to Huineng, whom he claimed as his teacher. Such interpretation makes sense if we assume that Shenhui's assorted statements about meditation and related forms of spiritual cultivation did not, on the whole, reflect careful consideration of the concrete exigencies of Chan practice.

From what we can tell about Shenhui's ecclesiastical agenda and his religious persona, the actual process of Chan practice, or religious training more generally, was not a major concern for him. That seems to fit into an image of him as a brash Chan popularizer—an “evangelist” of sorts—who was primarily interested in rousing or inspiring his audiences, increasing the size of his following, and enhancing his stature as a major religious figure.⁶⁹ Not being directly concerned with the daily training of monastic disciples, he apparently had no qualms about nonchalantly dismissing various forms of traditional practice, including meditation, especially if that could help him score a sectarian point.

A similar tendency to re-interpret the traditional meaning of meditation in abstract terms is also evidenced in the *Platform Scripture of the Sixth Patriarch* (*Liuzu tanjing* 六祖壇經). Traditionally this popular text is understood as containing the teachings of Huineng. However, the text has a complex provenance, and for the most part modern scholarship has questioned the direct connection between Huineng and the text. There, sitting meditation is interpreted as follows:

In this teaching, “sitting” means without any hindrance and without any obstruction, outwardly and under all circumstances, not to activate

⁶⁹ This view of Shenhui is argued by John McRae (n.d.), in an unpublished book manuscript titled *Zen Evangelist*. According to him, Shenhui was not a conventional type of “Chan teacher,” as that designation is normally understood. This kind of interpretation of Shenhui's religious persona is also suggested in his earlier article on Shenhui, cited above.

any thoughts. “Meditation” means internally to see the original nature and not become confused.⁷⁰

此法門中，無障無礙，外於一切善惡境界，心念不起，名為坐；
內見自性不動，名為禪。

In the next paragraph, the text goes on to redefine Chan meditation (*chan ding* 禪定; it can also be rendered as *dhyāna* and *sāmadhi*) in similarly abstract terms: Chan becomes an outward exclusion of forms, while meditation becomes an inward state of not being confused. In the end, from the perspective of the sudden teaching attributed to Huineng, meditation and wisdom are inseparable. That contrasts with the supposedly inferior gradual approach, imputed to the Northern school, in which the practice of meditation is seen as a tool that leads to a specific goal, namely the awakening of wisdom and the realization of liberation.⁷¹ It is the deluded person who, wrongly attaching to forms and characteristics, sits still without moving, and considers that to be an authentic form of Chan practice. Mistakenly attached to concentration as a method for obliterating mental confusion and falsehood, he wrongly attempts to prevent the arising of thoughts.⁷²

The list of mistaken practices mentioned in the *Platform Scripture* also includes the aforementioned viewing of mind and viewing of purity. These are taken to task for incorrectly positing specific objects of meditation and contravening the essential principle of non-duality.⁷³ Instead, we find Huineng promulgating the three interrelated “practices” that form the core of his teaching: “no-thought,” “formlessness” (*wuxiang* 無相), and “non-dwelling” (*wuzhu* 無住).⁷⁴

Because of the difficulty of tracing the authorship of the *Platform Scripture*, it is unclear if views of this kind were entertained by Huineng, who then might have influenced Shenhui’s thinking on the subject. It is also possible that Shenhui’s ideas influenced the unknown author(s) of the *Platform Scripture*.⁷⁵ Furthermore, it is worth pointing out that, on the whole,

⁷⁰ *Liuzu dashi fabao tan jing* 六祖大師法寶壇經, T 2008, 48: 353b; translation adapted from Yampolsky ([1967] 2012, 140).

⁷¹ Gregory (2012, 95-6).

⁷² Yampolsky ([1967] 2012, 136).

⁷³ Gregory (2012, 98); Yampolsky ([1967] 2012, 139-40).

⁷⁴ Yampolsky ([1967] 2012, 137-9); Gregory (2012, 99-106).

⁷⁵ See Shiina (1971, 137).

in the *Platform Scripture* there is a certain ambivalence about the usefulness of meditation practice and its compatibility with orthodox Chan teachings.

While an explicit rejection of formal mediation practice tends to be the dominant theme in the *Platform Scripture*, there are also sections that indicate a different point of view. For instance, in a key passage situated towards the end of the text, we find the dying Huineng bestowing his last instructions to the surviving disciples. His parting words include a clear injunction to continue the practice of sitting meditation. That seems to indicate that, in practical terms, it was possible to reconcile the rarefied rhetorical posture of the sudden teaching with the actual practice of meditation, notwithstanding the abovementioned tensions and critiques.

After Huineng finished reciting the verse, he told the assembled disciples, “Farewell to all of you. Now is the time for me to leave you. After I am gone.... You should do the same as if I am still with you. Together you should sit in meditation. Simply, let there be no movement, no purity, no creation, no annihilation, no going, no coming, no right, no wrong, and no abiding. As you thus remain calm and pure, that is precisely the great way.”⁷⁶

大師說偈已了，遂告門人曰：「汝等好住，今共汝別。吾去已後……如吾在日一種，一時端坐，但無動無淨，無生無滅，無去無來，無是無非，無住。但然寂淨，即是大道。」

The impact of the sorts of radical interpretations described above, within the religious and intellectual contexts of the mid-Tang period, is reflected in the writings of Zongmi 宗密 (780–841), who is usually described as both a Chan master and a Huayan exegete. Zongmi maintains that both canonical critiques and Chan dismissals of the practice of sitting meditation should not be taken at face value or interpreted literally. Arguing for the utility of expedient means, including meditation techniques, he points out that when canonical texts suggest that sitting meditation is not absolutely necessary, they do not necessarily advise the practitioner not to sit in meditation at all.⁷⁷ A prime example of that is the famous passage in the *Vimalakīrti Scripture* (mentioned in the quote below), in which the main hero, layman Vimalakīrti, criticizes

⁷⁶ T 2007, 48: 345a18-22; cf. Yampolsky ([1967] 2012, 181).

⁷⁷ *Chanyuan zhuquanji duxu* 禪源諸詮集都序, T 2015, 48: 403c; Kamata (1971, 116). For more on this and other texts composed by Zongmi that deal with Chan, see Broughton (2009).

Śariputra, the Buddha's great disciple, for sitting quietly in meditation under a tree in the forest.⁷⁸

In his *Chanyuan zhuquanji duxu* 禪源諸詮集都序 (*Preface to the Collected Materials on the Source of Chan*), Zongmi attributes these kinds of objections to conventional forms of meditation practice to an anonymous interlocutor, who presumably articulates views that had general currency at the time. That harkens back to some of the ideas presented in the *Platform Scripture*, where we find similar criticisms, attributed to Huineng, of unreflective or instrumental applications of meditative techniques. Once again, in the *Platform Scripture* this argument is illustrated by the story about Vimalakīrti's scolding of Śariputra for his solitary practice of meditation.⁷⁹ Here is how this kind of critique is presented by Zongmi:

Vimalakīrti reproached [Śariputra] for [his] quiet sitting. Heze [Shenhui] always criticized [the Northern school's practice of] freezing the mind. When Caoxi [Huineng] saw a person sitting cross-legged, he would hit him with his staff to make him get up. Why, may I ask, are you relying on the teachings and promoting [the practice of] sitting meditation? As meditation hermitages start to spread out and can be found all over cliffs and gorges, isn't that contrary to the essential principle and in defiance to [the teachings presented by] the patriarchs?⁸⁰

淨名已呵宴坐，荷澤每斥凝心，曹溪見人結跏，曾自將杖打起。
今問汝每因教誡，即勸坐禪。禪菴羅列，遍於巖壑，乖宗違祖。

The formal practice of meditation, along with an array of other traditional practices associated with canonical Buddhism, was also explicitly rejected by the Baotang school 保唐宗 in Sichuan, whose "history" and teachings are preserved in *Lidai fabao ji* 歷代法寶記 (*Record of the Dharma Jewel through Successive Generations*, compiled c. 774). Its leader, Wuzhu 無住

⁷⁸ The passage—one of the best-known in this very influential canonical text—appears in the "Disciples" chapter of the *Vimalakīrti Nirdeśa Sūtra*, or *Weimojie suoshuo jing* 維摩詰所說經; see Kumārajīva's translation, T 475, 14: 539c17-28. For an English translation, see Watson (1997, 37).

⁷⁹ See *Liuzu dashi fabao tan jing* 六祖大師法寶壇經, T 2008, 48: 353a; and Yampolsky ([1967] 2012, 137). See also the alternative version in T 2007, 48: 338b. The same passage from the *Vimalakīrti Scripture* is also quoted in the records of Shenhui, to the same effect.

⁸⁰ T 2015, 48: 401b; Kamata (1971, 59).

(714–774), was a radical proponent of the sudden doctrine, which he linked with the concept of no-thought. He interpreted that in terms of an extreme form of “non-discrimination” (*wu fenbie* 無分別),⁸¹ which opened him to a variety of criticisms, including those presented in the writings of Zongmi.⁸² In his ingenuous reformulation of the three learnings of canonical Buddhism (precepts, meditation, and wisdom), Wuzhu defines meditation as non-action and non-attainment; elsewhere he equates it with the non-arising of thoughts.⁸³ From his perspective, all distinctions, practices, and observances belong to the mundane realm of deluded thinking and attachment, which is transcended via the formless realization of no-thought.⁸⁴

Attitudes towards Meditation within the Hongzhou School

It is possible to detect important similarities between the Niutou school’s attitudes towards structured techniques of meditation and those evident in early records about leading monks associated with the Hongzhou school, which emerged during the late eighth century as the most influential school or lineage within the burgeoning Chan movement.⁸⁵ In early texts associated with the Hongzhou school, there is little explicit discussion of the topic of meditation. That might give an impression that the formal practice of meditation was disallowed, or at least was not a major concern within the Hongzhou school. There are even passages that go further, perhaps suggesting explicit rejection or criticism of meditation practice.

Perhaps the best example of a seeming rejection of formal mediation is the famous story that features the young Mazu Daoyi 馬祖道一 (709–788), the leader of the Hongzhou school, and his teacher Nanyue Huairang 南嶽懷讓 (677–744). According to tradition, this story depicts a key event in Mazu’s formative monastic development, and marks a starting point of his study under Huairang. In it, Huairang compares the traditional practice of sitting in

81 Yanagida (1983, 30).

82 See Gregory (1991, 248-50) and Broughton (2009, 182-3).

83 Adamek (2007, 203, 205, 343).

84 For reasons of space, I cannot provide a detailed analysis of all relevant aspects of Baotang school’s teachings and practices. For a comprehensive treatment of Wuzhu and Baotang Chan, see Adamek (2007).

85 This section is partially based on a similar section found in Poceski (2007, 135-9). I have shortened and revised parts of that section; I have also added extra references and discussions in some places.

meditation—purportedly undertaken by Mazu with an intent to realize buddhahood—to polishing a brick in order to turn it into a mirror.⁸⁶ The basic moral of the story is that, just as no amount of polishing can turn a brick into a mirror, no amount of meditation can turn a person into a buddha.

If taken at face value, this story can be interpreted as an overt critique of sitting meditation. Then again, it is also possible—and perhaps preferable—to read the story as a criticism of simplistic or naive notions about meditation, rather than as a cautionary tale about the uselessness of meditative praxis. In that case, the main critique is directed towards unreflective overreliance on external forms and procedures, or attachment to specific meditation techniques. That kind of interpretation is, on the whole, in tune with the overall thrust of the teachings of Mazu and his disciples. It is also possible to relate it to prominent canonical articulations about the nature and function of expedient means, which had noteworthy currency within the elite monastic circles in Tang China.

The same general idea regarding the unreflective deployment of meditation techniques can be expanded to include pretty much all conventional practices, or different types of spiritual cultivation. Stern warnings about the pitfalls of simple-minded attachment or mechanical application of all sorts of spiritual techniques are peppered across a whole spectrum of texts associated with prominent Hongzhou school figures, but perhaps nowhere more so—and in a more uncompromising fashion—than in the records of Huangbo. There we find this warning to his disciples (which is somewhat reminiscent of certain passages in the *Huayan Scripture*): “If you look for the Buddha externally and engage in practice while attaching to external forms, all of that is an evil teaching and is not the path to *bodhi* (awakening)” (向外求佛，著相修行，皆是惡法，非菩提道).⁸⁷

In a similar vein, after affirming the essential identity of mind and Buddha, Huangbo goes on to explain how the realization of buddhahood is independent of the myriad practices of the bodhisattva path, as described in canonical Buddhism:

⁸⁶ *Mazu daoyi chanshi guanglu* 馬祖道一禪師廣錄, R 119, 810a; see also *Jingde chuandeng lu* 景德傳燈錄 5, T 2076, 51: 240c-241a (Huairang’s biography). For translation, see Cheng-chien (1993, 59-60) and Poceski (2007, 28-9).

⁸⁷ *Huangbo shan duanji chanshi chuan xin fa yao* 黃檗山斷際禪師傳心法要, T 2012, 48: 380a15-16.

The rising of mind and the movement of thought, they are both contradictory to the essence of truth. They imply attachment to forms. From the time without beginning, there has never been a buddha that attaches to forms. To cultivate the six perfections and myriad practices, with the goal of becoming a buddha, that implies gradualness. From the time without beginning, there has never been a gradual buddha. You only need to awake to the one mind; beyond that, there is not even the slightest thing that can be attained. That is the true Buddha.⁸⁸

舉心動念，即非法體，即為著相，無始已來，無著相佛。修六度萬行，欲求成佛，即是次第，無始已來，無次第佛。但悟一心，更無少法可得，此即真佛。

Another example of a seemingly ambivalent attitude towards meditation is the following passage from one of Mazu's sermons, which can be found in his record of sayings, *Mazu yulu* 馬祖語錄, as well as in several earlier records about his life and teachings:

If one comprehends the mind and its objects, then false thinking is not created again.... It has existed from the beginning and it is present now, irrespective of cultivation of the Way and sitting in meditation. Not cultivating and not sitting: that is the Tathāgata's (Buddha's) pure meditation.⁸⁹

了心及境界，妄想即不生……本有今有，不假脩道坐禪。不脩不坐，即是如來清淨禪。

Yanagida and others seem to have misread this passage as an indication of the Hongzhou school's unequivocal rejection of formal meditation practice.⁹⁰ But the passage essentially articulates a fairly mainstream doctrinal position that can be traced back to canonical sources: intuitive realization of the sublime existence of the buddha-nature, which is innate and universal, does not depend on any technique or form of spiritual cultivation, including meditation.⁹¹ The statement about "not cultivating and not sitting," along with the story about Huairang polishing a brick in order to edify the young Mazu, can thus be understood as pointing to a higher or more sophisticated form of

⁸⁸ T 2012, 48: 380a3-6.

⁸⁹ *Mazu daoyi chanshi guanglu*, R 119, 813a; Cheng-chien (1993, 68).

⁹⁰ Yanagida (1967, 452).

⁹¹ See Foulk (1987, 127).

contemplation, which transcends all forms and is not dependent on conventional methods of practice. That resonates with some of the aforementioned ideas about meditation articulated by Zhiyi.

This kind of interpretation is supported by the contents of *Guishan jingce* 為山警策 (*Guishan's Admonitions*), an important Hongzhou school text that focuses on monastic ideals and practices, especially the crucial roles of morality and monastic discipline in Chan practice.⁹² This text suggests that the monastic congregation at the monastery led by Guishan Lingyou 為山靈祐 (771–853)—who was Mazu's second-generation disciple and one of the most prominent Chan teachers of his time—followed a fairly traditional regimen of monastic practices and observances. We can assume that some sort of meditation was part of the monastery's everyday routine, although unfortunately we do not have reliable accounts about the daily schedule and practice at this or other similar monasteries. That was presumably integrated into a peculiar Chan-based vision of a path of practice and realization, which supposedly leads to a direct insight into reality. Here is a representative passage that obliquely points to such understanding of contemplative practice. I should point out that, in the first sentence, the term “Chan” can also be interpreted in the general (conventional) sense of meditation.

If you want to practice Chan and study the Way, then you should suddenly go beyond the expedient teachings. You should harmonize your mind with the arcane path [that leads to spiritual liberation], explore the sublime wonders, make final resolution of the recondite [meaning], and awaken to the source of truth.⁹³

若欲參禪學道，頓超方便之門。心契玄津，研幾精妙，決擇深奧，啟悟真源。

The only extant text associated with the Hongzhou school that directly deals with the topic of meditation is *Zuochan ming* 坐禪銘 (*Inscription on Sitting Meditation*).⁹⁴ It is attributed to Ehu Dayi 鵝湖大義 (746–818), a leading disciple of Mazu who was active in Chang'an 長安, the primary capital of Tang China, during the early ninth century. This short text describes the

⁹² For a study of this text, see Poceski (2005).

⁹³ *Guishan jingce* 為山警策 (included in *Zimen jingxun* 緇門警訓), T 2023, 48: 1043a-b; also R 111, 146c-47a; translated in Poceski (2005, 30).

⁹⁴ For the original text, see *Zimen jingxun* 緇門警訓 2, T 2023, 48, 1048b-c. I hope to translate and analyze the text in a future publication.

practice of meditation in fairly conventional terms. It also briefly references the aforementioned story about Mazu and the brick polishing. The text advises Chan practitioners to “sit straight and proper like Tai mountain” (*zhengzuo duanran ru taishan* 正坐端然如泰山), an explicit reference to sitting meditation that points to proper physical posture, as well as to an associated state of mind that is stable and not swayed by various distractions. It also introduces other pertinent ideas related to formal meditation practice, such as “sitting quietly without exertion” (*jingzuo bu yonggong* 靜坐不用工) and “sitting and probing the source” (*zuo jiutan yuanyuan* 坐究探淵源).

There is no way of knowing the exact manner and the extent to which Mazu and his disciples practiced sitting meditation. It seems, however, that the lack of frequent mention of meditation in the extant records does not indicate an outright rejection of contemplative praxis, understood broadly. It is apparent that the formal practice of meditation was not as emphasized as in other Chan traditions, both earlier and later, including the Northern school in early Tang and the Linji school during the Song era. Presumably that was related to a general sense of ambiguity towards all forms of *upāya*, which is characteristic of the Hongzhou school as a whole. Such a stance is readily apparent in the extant records of some of Mazu’s famous disciples, including Baizhang and Huangbo (see above).⁹⁵ Their records highlight subtle approaches that integrate arcane doctrinal reflection with refined contemplative praxis. In the record of Baizhang, the central focus is on the three propositions (*sanju* 三句) he articulated, which point to a progressive path of practice that involves increasingly subtle levels of detachment and transcendence.⁹⁶

One of the key features of Huangbo’s text is its advocacy of no-mind. We already noted that he comes across as arguably the strongest critic of unreflective and unsophisticated reliance on various techniques and traditional forms of practice, which he relegates to the category of mere *upāya*. In essence, that implies a critique of much of Buddhism as it was actually

⁹⁵ See *Baizhang guang lu* 百丈廣錄, in *Guzunsu yulu* 古尊宿語錄 1, R vol. 118; *Huangboshan duanji chanshi chuanxin fayao* 黃檗山斷際禪師傳心法要 and *Huangboshan duanji chanshi wanling lu* 黃檗山斷際禪師宛陵錄, both compiled by Pei Xiu 裴休 (787?–860), available in (1) T 2012a and 2012b, vol. 48; (2) R vol. 119; and (3) Iriya (1969). For English translations, meant for a general audience, see Cleary (1978) and Blofeld (1958). For a Japanese translation of Huangbo’s texts, which also contains the original Chinese texts, see Iriya (1969).

⁹⁶ For details, see Poceski (2007, 207-12).

practiced at his time (or at most other times and places, one might add). However, such a lofty and uncompromising vision needs to be interpreted within the context of the religious milieu from which it sprang and the rarefied ideals that permeated it: a medieval monastery that was ostensibly dedicated to the pursuit of higher truths.

According to Huangbo, no-mind is both a state of mind and a form of practice. It involves ending deluded thoughts and transcending duality. He explains no-mind by recourse to an array of other concepts that had wide currency in Tang Chan, including the emptiness of all phenomena, non-abiding (*wuzhu* 無住), absence of the subject-object duality (*wuneng wusuo* 無能無所), and non-attainment (*wusuode* 無所得).⁹⁷ According to Huangbo, genuine Chan practice does not involve self-referential activity or trying to attain something. Rather, it encompasses elimination of all attachments and transcendence of all views, which tie the individual to ignorant existence, with all the suffering and imperfection that entails. Here is a brief passage that exemplifies this kind of thinking:

Straightaway, you should suddenly realize that your own mind is fundamentally not different from the Buddha. There is no singular truth to attain, nor is there a single practice to cultivate. That is the supreme way [Dao]. That is the true Buddha. Practitioners [lit. “students of the way”] should only worry about giving rise to a single thought that distances them from the way. When in each instant there is no form, when in each instant there is no activity: that is the Buddha. If practitioners wish to reach Buddhahood, they need not study all Buddhist teachings. They only need to “study” [i.e. train themselves in] non-seeking and non-attachment.⁹⁸

唯直下頓了自心本來是佛，無一法可得，無一行可修，此是無上道，此是真如佛。學道人，祇怕一念有，即與道隔矣。念念無相，念念無為，即是佛。學道人，若欲得成佛、一切佛法總不用學，唯學無求無著。

It is clear that Mazu and his disciples were not in favor of mechanical application of fixed techniques or overly structured modes of spiritual

⁹⁷ See *Chuanxin fayao*, T 2012a, 48: 380c; Iriya (1969, 20-3); and Blofeld (1958, 38). See also Poceski (2007, 161-2).

⁹⁸ *Chuanxin fayao*, T 2012a, 48: 381a; Iriya (1969, 25-7). With the exception of the first sentence, the translation is adapted from Poceski (2007, 162); see also Blofeld (1958, 40).

cultivation. However, that does not mean they did not engage in some sort of contemplative practice. Presumably their practice was of a fairly unstructured and formless kind, in tune with Mazu's seminal teaching about ordinary mind being the way (*pingchang xin shi dao* 平常心是道). Such practice was integrated into a larger spiritual vision, in which there was a central focus on developing increasingly subtler levels of detachment and transcendence. Contemplative practice was thus interpreted in light of doctrinal perspectives and soteriological orientations that were peculiar to the Hongzhou school, even as it resonated with the essential insights of canonical Buddhism.

Pure Land Elements

All of the schools or lineages surveyed above were branches of a broad and somewhat nebulous Chan movement, which for the most part was an integral part of mainstream Tang Buddhism. Just as there were considerable overlaps—along with notable differences—among the various schools that constituted the early Chan movement, there were significant overlays and intersections between them and assorted elements of Tang Buddhism.⁹⁹ An especially pertinent example of that is the conspicuous inclusion of elements typically associated with the Pure Land (*jingtu* 淨土) tradition in what can be labeled as Chan teachings. As an integral part of the Tang Buddhist landscape, Pure Land Buddhism incorporated popular beliefs about Buddha Amitābha (Emitufo 阿彌陀佛) and his Pure Land, Sukhāvātī (*Jile* 極樂, lit. “utmost bliss”), which was interpreted as a desirable place of blissful repose in the next world.¹⁰⁰

Beliefs about Amitābha and his potent role in the afterlife, which became widely diffused throughout Chinese Buddhism, were accompanied by an array of practices and merit-making activities meant to facilitate rebirth in his Pure Land. There the pious devotee would supposedly find himself in the glorious presence of Amitābha and his retinue of celestial bodhisattvas. Moreover, he will be virtually guaranteed final salvation, while dwelling in a place of great beauty and extraordinary comfort. Practices related to the quest for rebirth in the Pure Land included various rituals and related devotional practices, as well

⁹⁹ For a discussion of the notions of school and lineage, and the related religious identities associated with them, see Poceski (2007, 103-6).

¹⁰⁰ For a useful survey of the Pure Land tradition, including its basic character, its place in the broader Buddhist tradition, and the central issues that shape its study, see Yu (2014).

as contemplative techniques such as *nianfo*, which—depending on specific textual or soteriological context—can mean mindfulness, contemplation, visualization, or invocation of the Buddha (or his name).

Usually in contemplative practices of this kind, the buddha in question is Amitābha, but that does not necessarily have to be the case, as another buddha can also be a focal point of contemplation. It is also possible to do away with a literal understanding of mythical buddhas such as Amitābha—and their celestial abodes—as was often done within Chan circles. Instead, one was advised to focus on contemplating the “real” buddha within one’s own mind, in accord with the buddha-nature theory. Within such a framework, techniques such as *nianfo* were interpreted as mere expedient means, meant to address the spiritual needs and predilections of a certain type of practitioner.

The origins of Pure Land belief and practice can be traced back to India, where they initially developed within a nascent and evolving Mahāyāna milieu.¹⁰¹ Before long, texts and teachings containing ideas associated with the pure land of Amitābha—as well as the pure lands of other mythical buddhas such as Akṣobhya (Achufo 阿閼佛)—were transmitted into China, where they found large and receptive audiences.¹⁰² By the Tang era, a wide range of overlapping or loosely connected beliefs, ideals, and methods of spiritual cultivation, usually subsumed within the general category of Pure Land Buddhism, were enjoying great popularity and broad diffusion throughout Chinese Buddhism. Later quasi-historical reconstructions of these developments, especially the formulation of specific teachings and practices centered on belief in the salvific efficacy of Amitābha’s vows and elevation of rebirth in his pure land as the central soteriological objective, came to focus on several key figures associated with Pure Land exegesis and practice. That included noted promoters of Pure Land devotion such as Shandao 善導 (613–681) and Daochuo 道綽 (562–645), who retroactively came to be recognized as Pure Land patriarchs, largely in light of sectarian readings of Chinese Buddhist history, including those that developed within key Pure Land circles in Japan.

However, when we look at Tang Buddhism as a whole, we find the presence of Pure Land motifs and ideas in all sorts of places, including a number of early Chan texts. In other words, we are dealing with an assemblage of imageries, texts, beliefs, and practices that were in effect pan-Buddhist in scope, and were subjected to a range of interpretations: some

¹⁰¹ Schopen (1977).

¹⁰² Nattier (2000).

literalists, others more abstract or metaphorical. All these elements were approached with different degrees of seriousness or commitment, by diverse segments of the clergy and the laity. For some they were focal elements of an immensely appealing vision of Buddhism, while for others they were relatively minor parts of a much broader Buddhist tradition, which could be glossed over or reinterpreted in light of one's own intellectual predilections or religious sentiments.

Passages containing Pure Land terms, symbols, or themes, especially the practice of *nianfo*, can be found in a number of early Chan texts. Pertinent examples include Hongren's *Xiu xin yao lun* (also known as *Zui shangsheng lun* 最上乘論),¹⁰³ Daoxin's section in *Lengqie shizi ji*,¹⁰⁴ Northern school's (and possibly Shenxiu's) *Guan xin lun*,¹⁰⁵ and *Wu fangbian*.¹⁰⁶ In some of these texts we can find critiques of certain types of *nianfo* practice deemed to be simple-minded and unsophisticated, or not in accord with key Buddhist teachings such as the doctrine of emptiness.¹⁰⁷ However, on the whole the extant sources indicate that several forms of *nianfo* and related contemplative techniques were broadly disseminated within select Chan milieus, including the East Mountain tradition and the Northern school.¹⁰⁸

That kind of integration of *nianfo* practice into Chan teachings is also noted in the records of Zongmi. He goes as far as to identify one of the seven Chan schools described in his writings as focusing on a Chan-inflected type of *nianfo* practice. He calls it the Buddha Recollection Chan School of Nanshan (南山念佛門禪宗). He identifies Xuanshi 宣什 (dates unknown), a native of Sichuan and a disciple of Hongren who was known as an advocate of *nianfo* practice, as its central figure. In his commentary to the (apocryphal) *Scripture of Perfect Awakening*, the *Yuan jue jing da shu zhao* 圓覺經大疏鈔, Zongmi describes its central practice of “preserving the Buddha” (*cun fo* 存佛, also possible to translate as “maintaining the Buddha”)—one of its two distinctive practices, the other one being a ritual of incense transmission—as follows:

¹⁰³ *Zui shangsheng lun* 最上乘論, T 2011, 48: 377b17-18; translated in McRae (1986, 123).

¹⁰⁴ T 2837, 85: 1287b17-20, 1287c7-10, 1286c28-87a2, 1287a9-15; also see Sharf (2003, 303-4).

¹⁰⁵ T 2833, 85: 1273a5-13; Sharf (2003, 304-5). See also McRae (1986, 201).

¹⁰⁶ McRae (1986, 172, 229).

¹⁰⁷ See Sharf (2003, 301-9).

¹⁰⁸ See Faure (1997, 53-8).

As to what is called preserving the Buddha, at the time of bestowing the teaching the master first explains the principles of the various teachings and the purpose of spiritual cultivation. Then he leads [the disciples] in one-word Buddha invocation. At first the sound of the invocation is drawn-out. Then gradually the sound is reduced until there is silence. By going from subtle sound to silence, the [invocation] of Buddha becomes mental. However, such mental form of recollection is still coarse. [Ideally, the Buddha] should reach into the mind, and be preserved in each thought. Then the Buddha will remain in the mind forever. Eventually one will reach the absence of thoughts, and realize the path.¹⁰⁹

言存佛者，正授法時，先說法門道理、修行意趣，然後令一字念佛。初引聲由念，後漸漸沒聲、微聲，乃至無聲。送佛至意，意念猶羸，又送至心，念念存想，有佛恒在心中，乃至無想盡得道。

Although this passage seems to describe a peculiar technique of mindfulness or recollection of the Buddha, it echoes familiar patterns of contemplative practice. Essentially, it resonates with comparable forms of spiritual cultivation that were popular in medieval (and later) Buddhism, both within and outside of the Chan School. In that sense, it reinforces two of the central leitmotifs of this article: (1) the heterogeneity of contemplative methods present in early Chan, and (2) the porous lines of demarcation between Chan on one side and canonical (or conventional) forms of Buddhism on another.

Tiantai vs. Chan

Having surveyed the major approaches and predominant attitudes towards meditation within the burgeoning Chan movement, it might be helpful to briefly revisit the broader Buddhist context discussed earlier. As was already pointed out, the broad scope, structural coherence, doctrinal intricacy, and soteriological flexibility of the Tiantai system make it a useful template or point of comparison, especially for making sense of the meditative approaches and models of praxis developed by other Buddhist traditions. To this we can add the notable historical impact of Zhiyi's grand synthesis on the rest of Chinese (and more broadly, East Asian) Buddhism, including Chan.

¹⁰⁹ *Yuan jue jing da shu shi yi zhao* 圓覺經大疏釋義鈔 3, R 14, 558a14-18; translation loosely adapted from Jan (1972, 49). For another translation, see Broughton (2009, 187).

In terms of the basic paradigm of meditative praxis, in Tiantai we have three complementary approaches to meditation. First, there is the familiar notion of meditation as a formal exercise, usually performed in a quiet environment, which involves a sitting posture that settles the body, and a technique that aims at calming the mind or fostering a particular type of meditative discernment. Second, there is a broader understanding of meditation that, in addition to sitting meditation, also includes a variety of ritual procedures and other forms of spiritual cultivation, which are understood as expedient means. Finally, there is a formless type of practice, which directly confronts the true nature of reality, without reliance on specific forms or structures.

I would argue that within the Chan movement as a whole we can also find this range of interpretations or attitudes towards meditation, which points to certain commonalities or overlaps between the Chan and Tiantai formulations of doctrine and practice, especially within the context of early Chan. That does not preclude, of course, the presence of certain elements or articulations that are unique to the Chan school. Nonetheless, in the records of the various Chan traditions discussed above we can uncover an analogous array of views or understandings regarding the meaning and the role meditation plays in the Chan path of practice and realization. In that sense, Zhiyi's system helps us better understand the horizons of expectation and the interpretive choices faced by the Chan monks we encountered in the previous pages.

We should perhaps also note that Zhiyi's texts were read in Chan circles, probably well into the Song period. That is evident in the contents of *Zuochan yi* 坐禪儀 (*The Rite of Seated Meditation*), said to be the earliest extant meditation manual composed by a Chan master. This short but influential text is included in the standard version of *Chanyuan qinggui* 禪苑清規 (*Rules of Purity for Chan Monasteries*, in ten fascicles), the oldest full-fledged Chan monastic code, compiled in 1103 by Changlu Zongze 長蘆宗蹟 (d. 1107?).¹¹⁰ While Zongze's text—which, within the context of Song Chan, presents a fairly conservative perspective on meditation practice—contains elements that are peculiar to Chan, there are also echoes and parallels with Zhiyi's writings, especially his *Xiao zhiguan*.¹¹¹

¹¹⁰ For this Chan code, see Kagamishima et al (1972) and Yifa (2002).

¹¹¹ This text later became a source for Dōgen Kigen's 道元希玄 (1200–1253) celebrated *Fukan zazen gi* 普勸坐禪儀 (*Universal Recommendation of the Practice of Sitting Meditation*). See Bielefeldt (1986, 1988).

Nonetheless, there are also some notable differences between Chan and Tiantai; I will briefly mention three. First, within the Tiantai tradition there is a tighter integration between Buddhist doctrine and meditative praxis. That is not that surprising, given the Tiantai tradition's philosophical orientation. Second, within Tiantai there is a greater degree of comfort with—or even active promotion of—the deployment of a wide range of contemplative techniques and related practices. In contrast, within Chan the range of contemplative options is more limited. That tendency becomes even more pronounced in later forms of Chan and culminates with the emphasis, sometimes bordering on obsession, on a single technique. That especially becomes a notable feature of Chan practice from the Song period onward. Presently it is perhaps most visible in the kind of Chan/Sōn fundamentalism prevalent in contemporary Korean Buddhism, which singularly exalts the Kanhwa technique as the highest and most sublime form of Buddhist spirituality.

Finally, within early Tiantai we do not find the kinds of radical approaches, exemplified by the teachings of Shenhui and Wuzhu, which seem to offhandedly dismiss the relative value of traditional forms of practice. As we saw, some Chan teachers adopted peculiar rhetorical postures that highlighted the dubious prospect of an immediate realization of absolute truth, at the expense of careful consideration of the everyday exigencies of spiritual cultivation. They also popularized such teaching among broad audiences, even while asserting that the realization of such truths is reserved for those with superior spiritual talent or capacity. In contrast, Zhiyi was apparently well aware of the limited spiritual aptitudes and self-deluding propensities of most members of the human species, and he formulated his teachings in ways that accounted for those realities.

Concluding Remarks

Within the early Chan tradition, the presence of a variety of attitudes and approaches to the practice of meditation reflected a general sense of intellectual openness, doctrinal fluidity, and religious creativity. That was characteristic not only of the heterogeneous Chan movement but also of much of Tang Buddhism. In some instances, exemplified by texts associated with the East Mountain tradition and the Northern school, we can discern an emphasis on articulating specific techniques or approaches to Chan meditation, some of which drew on ideas traceable to other religious traditions. In contrast,

in other Chan records we find calls to reject the formal practice of meditation, primarily articulated by advocates of peculiar forms of radical subitism, such as Wuzhu and Shenhui.

In between these opposing poles, we can also identify prominent efforts within some influential Chan circles—most notably the Hongzhou and the Niutou schools—to find a peculiarly Chan type of middle way that would straddle the overlapping spheres of theoretical reflection and practical application. Such measured approach was along the lines of what Zhiyi had previously done within the Tiantai school, even if it left aside the rich array of contemplative practices that was among the trademarks of Zhiyi's system. That involved a subtle and fine-tuned balancing act, which aimed to avoid extreme positions. On one hand, there was the danger of unreflective overreliance, or one-dimensional dependence, on various forms of skillful means, including specific meditation techniques. At the same time, there was recognition of the need to formulate ingenious and effective programs of contemplative praxis that were organically integrated into a larger vision of the Chan path, which could respond to the needs and abilities of actual practitioners.

In a sense, these kinds of formulations can be framed in terms of an ongoing reflection on the nature of the Chan path and the function of expedient means, including meditation techniques. Do expedient means have a place in the Chan path? If they do, how should they be construed and deployed? If they do not, than what are the practical ramifications of an approach based on such a point of view?

One of the reasons for the Hongzhou school's rapid rise to prominence and its assumption of a dominant position within the Chan movement was perhaps its ability to best meet these sorts of challenges. Like some of the earlier Chan teachers, especially those associated with the Niutou school, Mazu and his disciples were critical of the reliance on mechanical implementation of specific techniques. Unlike Zhiyi, they were also, on the whole, tentative about the wide-ranging deployment of expedient means. Nonetheless, they were able to articulate a nuanced and compelling vision of contemplative life that, while grounded in the ethos of medieval monasticism and echoing the central philosophical insight of the canonical tradition, was also not narrowly constrained by specific forms or fixed models of praxis. Needless to say, such a vision of religious life did not have the makings of a popular religious movement; rather, it was unabashedly elitist in its basic orientation.

Looking beyond the milieu of Tang Chan, by tracing and illuminating larger historical trajectories of this kind, especially as they pertain to the changing conceptions and attitudes towards meditative praxis, we can improve our understanding of significant and multifaceted changes that took place in the social and religious worlds of Chinese Buddhism. Among other things, that can help us avoid problematic interpretations of Chan history, including a teleological reading that uncritically celebrates specific later forms of Chan theory or praxis, such as Kanhua Chan or kōan Zen, as culminations of key historical processes that supposedly brought the highest reaches of Buddhist spirituality to mass audiences.

In addition, this sort of analysis, while here undertaken within the context of academic discourse, can perhaps go beyond a scholarly quest for improved historical understanding of Chan Buddhism and the role of contemplative practice within it. As far as contemporary Buddhism is concerned, increased awareness and appreciation of medieval texts and teachings, especially those I have briefly discussed here, can perhaps lead to a fruitful reassessment of Chan Buddhism's multilayered history and the character of its teachings. Conceivably it can also lead to an imaginative rethinking of ingrained ideological suppositions and prevalent approaches to spiritual cultivation that shape contemporary thinking about Buddhism. By becoming familiar with a broader array of traditional paradigms, especially as they pertain to key aspects of Chan spirituality, present-day Buddhist scholars and practitioners alike—including those who promote narrow visions of Buddhism, or encourage the fetishizing of a specific text, figure, lineage, teaching, or method of practice—might be able to engage in a deeper reassessment of received traditions and dominant orthodoxies.

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