

Meditation in Chinese Buddhist Tradition

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Abstract

Buddhist meditation had been introduced into China since the Later Han dynasty (25-220). According to modern scholars such as Japanese Nukariya Kaiten and Chinese Ran Yuhua, before Bodhidharma came to China in the fifth century, the kind of meditation Chinese Buddhists practiced was non-Mahāyāna in nature, or even if Mahāyāna, it was not sudden enlightenment. Even the Tang dynasty (618-907) Chan master monk Zongmi (784-841) also said, “Before Bodhidharma came, the meditation taught by the ancient masters is about the four meditations and eight concentrations.” According to Zhongmi, “When Bodhidharma came to China he taught sudden enlightenment that our mind is fundamentally and naturally pure originally without defilements. The self-nature of intelligence without contamination is fundamentally and naturally sufficient unto themselves. This mind is Buddha absolutely without any difference.” The Mahayana meditation means to realize the nature of one’s mind.

The great Chan master Huineng developed this idea and said, “*In this teaching ‘sitting’ means without any obstruction anywhere, outwardly and under all circumstances, not to activate thoughts. ‘Meditation’ is internally to see the original nature and not become confused.*” “*And what do we call Chan meditation? Outwardly to exclude form is Chan; inwardly to be unconfused is meditation. When there is no form on the outside, and internally the nature is not confused, then, from the outset, you are of yourself pure and of yourself in meditation.*” According to Huineng, meditation is a mental training leading to the awakening of wisdom and realization of the pure nature. The observation of the mind can be done at any time any place not necessarily sitting with crossed legs. Therefore he explained that Chan should be practiced in daily life.

By the ninth to the tenth century, Chinese Chan developed to a kind of Chan play with words and letters called “words Chan”. Thus, records of Chan masters’ sayings became an important feature of Song Buddhism named as “Record of Lamp” and “Record of Sayings”. These *Records of Sayings* are a freestyle literature, recorded passage by passage, so most of the records are simultaneous or instant speeches of patriarchs or some sayings focused on a particular issue or topic. The best part of the text is the *Gongan* (Japanese *Kōan*) or “Public Records” of enlightening stories, which were used by Chan masters to illustrate and enlighten their disciples.

Thus, Zonggao, worrying about the degeneration of Chan with the playing of word games, created the *Huatou Chan* which means the meditation of pondering over an utterance. This is a way of meditation on the profound meaning of a difficult sentence in the stories or *Gongan*. It is said that “*If a sentence is understandable it is not good for meditation; it is only with those sentences without answer that is useful.*” Thus

Chinese Chan masters created their own way of meditation, called the Patriarch Meditation, which is very different from the Indian way of meditation. Hence Chinese Buddhists completely transformed the Indian meditation tradition into Chinese Chan.