Huineng’s “Sudden-enlightenment” Path of “No-thought”, “Non-form” and “Non-abiding”

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Abstract. Huineng stressed attaining Enlightenment and Buddhahood through spiritual practice based on one’s intrinsically pure mind - self-nature. According to Huineng, Buddha is in the mind, not outside the mind. What is important is to make an effort to cultivate “one’s own mind” and “realize the mind and see self-nature”. The path for realizing the mind and seeing self-nature is called “no-thought”, “non-form” and “non-abiding”. This paper has taken Huineng’s “Sudden-enlightenment” Path of “No-thought”, “Non-form” and “Non-abiding” as its objects of research, and the author is attempting, through research and investigation, to analyze the source, characteristics and ideological methodology of the concepts of “No-thought”, “Non-form” and “Non-abiding”.

Introduction

Huineng (638-713) interpreted Buddha nature as self-nature in the human mind. The Platform Sutra mentions that after he realized the essence of mind and saw self-nature, he found that self-nature was intrinsically pure, was intrinsically free from becoming or annihilation, was intrinsically self-sufficient and was intrinsically free from change. Moreover, he indicated that “all things are the manifestation of self-nature”. His path for seeing self-nature is “no-thought”, “non-form” and “non-abiding”.

1. The Concepts of “No-Thought”, “Non-form” and “Non-abiding” in The Platform Sutra

The Platform Sutra shows that the aim of Huineng’s Chan Buddhist teaching of Sudden-enlightenment is to realize the mind by seeing self-nature. A significant question to be asked here is how to realize the mind and see self-nature. Regarding this, The Platform Sutra states:

“Good friends, in this teaching of mine, from ancient times up to the present, all have set up no-thought as the main doctrine, non-form as the substance, and non-abiding as the basis.”

From this, we can see that according to Yampolsky’s translation, the path for realizing the mind and seeing self-nature is called “no-thought”, “non-form” and “non-abiding”.

According to the Mahayana Buddhist philosophy and doctrine, Chan Buddhism is dependent upon the mind of sentient beings which is tathāgatagarbha. The absolute aspect of the mind represents svabhāva or essence of Chan Buddhism; that is, tathatā or Buddha-tathatā in Sanskrit, which may be translated into English literally as “Real Suchness”, “True Suchness”, “the state that is really so” etc. Moreover, it is represented as zhufa shixiang (the true nature of all things), zhenru (true suchness), faxing (the nature of Dharma), zixing (self-nature) and foxing (Buddha nature) in Huineng’s system of the sudden-enlightenment school of Chan Buddhism. It is the dharmadhātu and the essence of all phases of existence in their totality”, which possesses the characteristic of “no-thought”, “non-form” and “non-abiding”.

Thus, “no-thought”, “non-form” and “non-abiding” are the states that, for all time, have been independent of speech, terms, and mental causation, and which in the final analysis are everywhere the same, undergoes no changes, and can not be broken or destroyed. This was further explained by Huineng in The Platform Sutra.
“No-thought is not to think even when involved in thought.”

“To be unstained in all environments is called no-thought.”

“True Reality is the substance no-thoughts; thoughts are the function of True Reality. If you give rise to thoughts from your self-nature, then, although you see, hear, perceive, and know, you are not stained by manifold environments, and are always free.”

“Non-form is to be separated from form even when associated with form... Being outwardly separated from all forms, this is non-form. When you are separated from form, the substance of your nature is pure.”

“Non-abiding is the original nature of man. Successive thoughts do not stop; prior thoughts, present thoughts, and future thoughts follow one after the other without cessation.”

Huineng’s concepts of “No-thought”, “Non-form” and “Non-abiding” illustrate the point that Chan Buddhism has given the fullest elucidation of the Mahayana theory that all dharmas are empty (śūnya), and one’s original nature is pure and undefiled, and in doing so, Chan Buddhism has merged the worldly dharmas and transmundane dharma.

It is the common ultimate goal of all the schools of Mahayana Buddhism and Theravada Buddhism to seek emancipation from the cycle of births and deaths and reach the other shore of the tranquil and quiescence of Nirvana. However, at different stages in the development of Buddhism, there had been differences in the theoretical elucidation and practices with regard to how to attain emancipation from the cycle of births and deaths, what the state of Nirvana is, what the relationship between the worldly and the transmundane is, as well as other issues.

In Primitive Buddhism and Sectarian Buddhism, “samsaric births and deaths” and “Nirvana”, “the worldly” and “the transmundane” are treated separately or even as diametrically opposite. They were averse to samsaric births and deaths and they renounced the world. They took delight in Nirvana and the transmundane. However, according to the theory that all dharmas are empty (śūnya) as taught in Mahayana Buddhism, this is still a form of discrimination and attachment. In emphasizing that all dharmas are empty (śūnya), what is meant in Mahayana Buddhism is that not only the self is empty (śūnya), dharmas are also empty (śūnya); not only the conditioned dharmas (sajskṛta-dharmah) are empty (śūnya), the unconditioned dharmas (asajskṛta-dharmah) are also empty (śūnya). Since all dharmas are empty (śūnya), they are equal and without distinction. In terms of “samsaric births and deaths” and “Nirvana”, that means - “samsaric births and deaths” and “Nirvana” are equal and without distinction.

Based on this, Mahayana Buddhism uses the non-dual Middle Path to emphasize “not entering samsaric births and deaths, not coming out of samsaric births and deaths; not entering Nirvana, not coming out of Nirvana”, “not relinquishing the Dharma and yet manifesting the ways of the unenlightened people”, “not eradicating defilements and yet enter Nirvana”, “not engaging in defiled conduct while one is in samsaric births and deaths, not entering permanent extinction while one abides in Nirvana”, “manifesting the various defilements and yet one’s mind is always pure and undefiled”, “the worldly and the transmundane are dual, by being empty in nature, the worldly is the transmundane, with the former neither entering nor coming out of the latter, neither overflowing nor dissipating from the latter - this is the teaching of non-dualism”.

Chan Buddhism has most fully emphasized and given full scope to the spirit of the Mahayana teaching of non-dualism, actively connecting the worldly and the transmundane, emphasizing engagement in worldly matters with the transmundane mind, and using loving-kindness, compassion and wisdom as the basic spirit in putting Mahayana Buddhism into practice. This is the way in which Chan Buddhism has adapted to the needs of society and why it has been readily accepted by the vast masses. At the same time, Chan Buddhism has provided beneficial inspiration and experience for the promotion of “humanistic Buddhism” in the present times.
2. The Commentary of Shenhui and Yang Huinan

Regarding the concepts of “no-thought”, “non-form” and “non-abiding”, Shenhui (684-758) commented in *A Record of Shenhui’s Sayings (Shenhui yulu)*, “not to think of anything at all” is to “cultivate and abide in emptiness”. On the other hand, “no-thought” is “not to allow the mind to be contaminated by various objects” and to be ever detached from these objects. In other words, as it is stated above, “to be unstained in all environments”, which is the meaning of “non-abiding”. The meaning of “non-form” is being amid the phenomenal yet devoid of the phenomenal. According to Shenhui, when *The Platform Sutra* talks of “no-thought”, “non-form” and “non-abiding”, it is actually only saying “no-thought”.

The commentary of Shenhui suggested that: 1) in terms of prajñā, “no thought”, “non-form” and “non-abiding” are really only “no thought” because to refrain from thinking of anything, prajñā has neither an abiding form, nor a characteristic. True Thusness (tathata) is without thought. It can not be known through conception and thought. The mind is originally without activity; the Way is always without thought. 2) Obviously, the skillfulness of “no thought” is perfection of wisdom - prajñā. The practice of “no-thought” is the practice of prajñā.

In his article entitled, “The Meaning of ‘Self-nature’ in *The Platform Sutra*” (*Tanjing zhongzhi zixing de hanyi*), Yang Huinan indicated that the concepts of “no-thought” and “non-form” were the sunyatā notion of the prajñāpāramitā [5]. The concept of the tathata “self-nature” (True Thusness, True Reality) belongs to the system of tathāgatagarbha Buddha nature. The concept of “non-abiding” is a term with interaction value between prajñāpāramitā and tathāgatagarbha. Moreover, he graphically illustrated this by means of the following configuration,

![Figure 1. The Relationship between Self-nature and Non-abiding.](image)

Based on this configuration, Yang Huinan interpreted that: 1) both thought and all phenomena were the manifestations of self-nature. The natures of thought and phenomena are intrinsically pure. 2) Due to the fact that both thought and all phenomena are intrinsically pure, thus they should be “non-abiding” and furthermore, they should also be “no-thought” and “non-form”.

In Yang’s commentary, the relationship between Buddha nature (tathāgatagarbha) and the sunyatā of prajñā is not on an equal footing, but subordinate. On one hand, self-nature is the origin of all phenomena, and it thus possesses the function of “no-thought”, “non-form” and “non-abiding”. This idea is described in *The Platform Sutra* as, “the wisdom of enlightenment (bodhi) is inherent in every one of us. It is because of the delusion under which our minds work that we fail to realize it ourselves”. “All prajñā comes from the essence of mind and not from an exterior source”. Sunyatā of prajñā, “no-thought”, “non-form” and “non-abiding” are the manifestations of self-nature. On the other hand, “no-thought”, “non-form” and “non-abiding” are only the path leading to enlightenment. They are not a final goal but they are only the Sudden-enlightenment path, skillfulness and technology. The final goal is to realize the mind and to see self-nature. That is, to fully cultivate the tathāgatagarbha Buddha nature, and thus become a Buddha.

**Conclusion**

Based on the above discussion, an important characteristic of Huineng’s concept of “realizing the mind and seeing self-nature” was the interpretation of Buddha nature as being in the human mind.
Moreover, the way of cultivating the mind and of “realizing the mind and seeing the self-nature” is the path of “no-thought”, “non-form” and “non-abiding;” the technology of “no-thought”, “non-form” and “non-abiding” is actually only the skillfulness of “no-thought”. The concept of “no-thought” merged the worldly dharmas and the transmundane dharma. Therefore, since the time that Huineng founded the teaching of “Sudden Enlightenment”, Chan had been extensively spread day by day. The thought of Chan masters Huineng had aroused popular faith at various strata of society. In the other Buddhist schools, the concurrent practice of Chan Buddhism together with their own teachings had been widespread. After the Tang Dynasty, Chan Buddhism had become a “common teaching” for the various Buddhist schools. Chan Buddhism had also been integrated with the indigenous culture of China, and it had exerted direct or indirect influence upon Chinese politics, economy, culture, arts, science and technology, architecture and even the mentality of the entire Chinese people. It has become an inseparable part of the indigenous culture of China.

References