Hui-neng’s Chan Buddhist Concept of “Directing at the Mind”
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Abstract: As the Sixth Patriarch of Chinese southern Chan Buddhist School, Hui-eng’s sudden-Enlightenment concept of “directing at the mind” had exerted a tremendous, profound and far-reaching influence upon the history of Chinese Chan Buddhism and Neo-Confucianism during Song and Ming dynasties. Scholars have given ample affirmation to the value and position occupied by Hui-neng’s sudden-Enlightenment Chan. In spite of the fact that there has been a great deal of research done on his sudden-Enlightenment Chan, there remain areas, such as sudden-Enlightenment path of “directing at the mind,” yet unexplored. Therefore, this paper taken Hui-neng’s Chan Buddhist concept of “directing at the mind” as its objects of research; the research will be approached by focusing on two aspects: 1) directing at the mind, and 2) the purpose of directing at the mind: to see into One's nature and become a Buddha.

Introduction
Hui-eng (638-713), a renowned Chan Buddhist Master of the Tang dynasty (618-907), was known for his sudden-Enlightenment Chan. His major teaching was the Platform Sutra, which incorporates, in some form and to some degree, all his major Chan Buddhist philosophical ideas. According to this work, the foundation of sudden-Enlightenment is “directing at the mind.”

Directed at the Mind
Hui-neng laid stress on attaining Enlightenment and Buddhahood through spiritual practice based on one’s originally pure mind. The most prominent example is his advocacy of “one’s mind is the Buddha.” According to this, whether sentient beings can attain Buddhahood or not is dependent on their thought. Hui-neng said,

“By being deluded in the preceding thought, one has been an ordinary, unenlightened person, by being enlightened in the subsequent thought, one becomes a Buddha.”[1]

The Buddha is in the mind, not outside the mind. With regard to the question of “this shore” and “the other shore,” Hui-neng had said explicitly,

“What is parami? This is in the Sanskrit language. In the Chinese language, this has been rendered as ‘reach the other shore’, meaning liberation from samsaric births and deaths. By being attached to phenomena, samsaric births and deaths arise, just like the arising of waves in water, this is called ‘this shore’; by renouncing attachment to phenomena, samsara births and deaths cease, just like water that always flows unobstructed, this is called ‘the other shore’, thus the term ‘parami’.”…[2]

Through the explanation of the word “parami,” Hui-neng had explained that whether one is able to reach the other shore or not hinges on whether the mind is attached to phenomena or not. Hui-neng had expressed the following,

“The people of the east who had committed negative karma recite the Buddha’s name and seek rebirth in the Western Pureland; for the people of the west who have committed negative karma, when they recite the Buddha’s name, in which Pureland can they seek rebirth?”[3]

He advised people not to “wish for the east or the west”, what is important is to put efforts in cultivating “one’s own mind.” Hui-neng also said,

“Buddhahood is attained within one’s nature, do not seek it outside oneself.”[4]
It is thus clear that an important characteristic of the Hui-neng’s thought was the interpretation of Buddha-nature as being in the mind. When this thought was further developed until the Sung Dynasty, its ethical inclinations became even more prominent. The eminent monks and greatly virtuous ones of that time, such as Qi Song, Zhiyuan and Zonggao had all greatly promoted Buddhism in the direction of ethics at that time.

From the angle of blending Buddhism and Confucianism, they held that Buddhism was mainly for healing the mind while Confucianism was mainly for healing the world, and that which heals the mind can assist in healing the world. In short, in the eyes of these eminent monks and greatly virtuous ones, Buddhism was often able to “guide the human mind, and assist in the emperor’s reign,” having the social functions of “purifying the human mind, assisting in edification of the people, making the social customs simple and sincere, as well as benefiting the management of the state affairs.”

Seeing from a broader perspective, the ancient sages and virtuous learned ones of China had all along emphasized the role of religion in purifying the human mind and assisting in edification of the people. For instance, they had drawn on religion to purify the human mind and educate the common people. Chan Buddhism had succeeded to this tradition, admonishing its followers to abide by the Five Precepts and Ten Wholesome Actions, advising the people “not to do any evil”, advocating “the healing of the mind” and “enabling the common people to become pure and simple”, or making the calls for “benefiting others and helping the people”, in order to reconcile the conflicts between Buddhist thought and Confucian ethics as far as possible, and spare no effort in strengthening the function of Buddhism in educating the society. This would have accorded well with the original intention of the Buddha in helping the masses and benefiting sentient beings extensively out of loving-kindness and compassion.

The Aim of Directing at the Mind: to see into one’s Nature and Become a Buddha

Hui-neng experienced in sudden enlightenment and realized in daily life the mirror-nature of the mind and the spiritual nature of reality, which are the basic concepts of his metaphysics of all reality is spirit (Mind). The mind is one and, like a mirror, is in motionless repose and yet perpetually active, for its brightness reflects continuously. To behold the mind, no special exercises of concentration are necessary. It is enough, rather, to be freed from all duality in order that the mind may shine in primal purity.

“The enlightenment is your own nature. Originally it was entirely pure. Only avail yourselves of this mind and you will immediately become a Buddha.”[5]

Original nature is inherently enlightened, it is wisdom (prajna) and “of itself in contemplation” (samadhi).

“Contemplation is not distinct from wisdom and wisdom is not distinct from contemplation. They are related as the lamp is to its light; both are inseparable.” [6]

Therefore it is not necessary first to engage in contemplation in order to attain wisdom. Contemplation and wisdom are one and the same. The prerequisite for the realization of this identity is the absence of passions, images, and thoughts. Originally self-nature is free from all duality.

“It is like the Void--without limitation, also without angular or circular [form]; without greatness or smallness, neither blue nor yellow, red nor white; without an above or a below, neither long nor short; also without vexation or joy, without yes or no, good or evil, beginning nor end. All Buddha-regions are entirely like the Void.” [7]

The resolving of all opposites in the Void is the basic metaphysical doctrine of the Diamond Sutra of Transcendental Wisdom, on which Hui-neng based his teachings. The absence of thoughts, which is achieved in the practice of contemplation by the suppression of all concepts, is regarded as the primal state of the mind whose mirror-light clings to no concept.

“If the mind seeks to secure itself in nirvana, it is bound by [the concept of] nirvana. If it seeks to cling to the Void, it is bound by [the concept of] the Void.” [8]
Conversely, the absence of all thoughts indicates that the mind adheres to no object but engages rather in pure mirror-activity. This absolute knowing constitutes the unlimited activity of inexhaustible motion in the motionlessness of the mind.

In contrast to intuitive knowledge, the enlightenment of prajbā is directed toward no object; indeed, it consists of no conscious mental activity whatsoever. All objects are cleared away by the contemplation of the Void, and personal consciousness is overcome. Enlightenment occurs in the contemplation of one’s own nature, which, like the Buddha-nature, is absolute and universal. Therefore it is equated with the Dharma-world (dharma-dhātu), namely, the totality of all things. This nature is not awakened through outer means, but awakening occurs spontaneously at the base of the mind which comprehends the entire world of Dharma.

“One’s own nature is of the same order as space. Its substance is identical with the Dharma-world.”[9]

All distinctions are nullified, and there is no difference between good and evil.

“...Good and evil are indeed contradictory, but their original nature is not different. This nondual nature is to be regarded as true nature. In this true nature there is no infection of good and evil…”[10]

The distinction between enlightenment and illusion is likewise not one of essence.

“The ordinary man is (at the same time) Buddha. The beclouding (of knowledge) is (at the same time) Bodhi (enlightenment).”[11]

When one sees into one’s own nature the passions disappear. The enlightened person is Buddha. This is “true deliverance.” “Everyone is to deliver himself in his own nature.” In place of taking refuge in Buddha one is to take refuge in one’s own nature.

“...I advise you, understanding ones, to take refuge in the Triple Jewel of your own nature …”[12]

“...The Buddha with his three bodies subsists in our own nature. All men possess him in common...”[13]

“To take refuge by the mind in one's own nature is to take refuge in the true Buddha.”[14]

Since in Sudden Enlightenment Chan everything depends on realization by sudden experience, nowhere in the lectures and conversations which constitute the core of the texts of the southern sect does one find developed a philosophical epistemology. And yet quite obviously it presupposes the monistic view according to which all duality implies imperfection. Since self-consciousness and objective knowledge introduce duality into the spirit, these are excluded from the state of enlightenment. This is the viewpoint of pantheistic metaphysics. Hui-neng and his school derived their metaphysical views from the Mahayanist doctrine of Transcendental Wisdom (prajbāpāramitā), the sutras of which they cherished above all others.

“Take and read the Diamond Prajbā Sutra[15] and you will arrive at seeing into your own nature. You must know that the merits of this sutra are unfathomable and unlimited... When the followers of Mahāyāna and of the Supreme Vehicle hear the preaching of the Diamond Sutra, their spirit is opened to awakening.”[16]

The philosophy of Mahāyāna Buddhism must be regarded as the first source of the metaphysical conception of Hui-neng. One can detect in the expression and development of his thought much of the legacy of China. When, for example, Hui-neng employs the conceptual scheme of substance and function in order to elucidate the relationship of contemplation (samādhi) and wisdom (prajbā)[3], he actually pours Buddhist contents into Chinese molds.Likewise, he speaks of the Dharma-world in much the same way that the Taoists speak of the universe. Nonetheless his cosmology stays within the Buddhist framework. And yet, even though the various elements of his proclamation existed beforehand, we can recognize his originality, the originality not of a thinker but of a mystic. Hui-neng assimilated in his personal experience the Mahayanist metaphysics, enriched by Taoist influence, and proclaimed this message with the fervor of an evangelist.

The realization of enlightenment brings final liberation. This liberation is experienced immediately, as “a person feels both warm and cold when he drinks water.” Words are of no avail.
“Just as one’s hunger is not stilled by talking about food, so by mere speaking one cannot, in ten thousand aeons, attain a view of reality.”[17]

Hui-neng is inspired by the doctrine of Transcendental Wisdom (prajñāpāramitā), on which the mystical metaphysics of his Chan is based.

**Conclusion**

In conclusion, the distinguishing mark of Hui-neng’s school of enlightenment is suddenness. But it must be specified dearly what is meant by suddenness, and wherein lies the difference from other ways of meditation. The elimination of all preliminary stages and the renunciation of all preparatory exercises is the typical Chinese element in the Chan of Hui-neng. Instantaneous and complete liberation without preliminary practice is the genuinely new element in Hui-neng’s way of enlightenment. This awakening in a single instant makes all effort superfluous. To be sure, there are differences in the subjective faculties of comprehension between those who are “quick to understand” and those who are “slow to understand,” but Hui-neng does not construct a method of gradual approach based upon the psychological differences among people. Hui-neng’s path of sudden enlightenment is directing at the mind, and the purpose of directing at the mind is to see into one’s nature and become a Buddha.

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