

In what ways did Ch'an/Zen utilise, add to and go beyond Indian Buddhist ideas and practices?

'Therefore, put aside the intellectual practice of investigating words and chasing phrases, and learn to take the **backward step** [bold mine] that turns the light and shines it inward. Body and mind of themselves will drop away, and your original face will manifest. If you want to realize such, get to work on such right now'¹.

In this essay, I will argue that Ch'an/Zen, notwithstanding its variegated internal diversity (ultimately irreducible to any generalisations), is fundamentally a sophisticated attempt to take a backward step towards the original teachings of the Buddha. It is therefore a radicalisation of Indian Buddhism, in its deliberately ambivalent meaning of 'going back to the roots' (*radix*, in Latin) and 'taking the teachings to their extreme consequences'. As Cousins provocatively puts it: 'in reality, there is almost nothing in Ch'an which cannot be paralleled in earlier Indian Buddhism. The difference is in *style*, rather than *content*'².

I will limit my exposition to three aspects in which Ch'an/Zen has radicalised the *Dharma*: soteriology, practice and language. I intend to show how Ch'an/Zen has utilised, added to and somewhat gone beyond Indian Buddhism ideas and practices, especially with reference to Early

¹ Dōgen Zenji, *Universally Recommended Instructions for Zazen (Fukan zazengi)*, in Sōto Zen Text Project, <http://www.stanford.edu/group/scbs/sztp3/index.html>, 17th February 2007, >Translations> Soto School Scriptures for Daily Services and Practice: http://www.stanford.edu/group/scbs/sztp3/translations/gongyo_seiten/translations/part_3/fukan_zazengi.html.

² Cousins 1997: 421.

Buddhism (as represented by the Pāli Canon and the Theravāda school) and Indian Mahāyāna doctrines (especially the Madhyamaka school - also known as the Śūnyatā-vāda - and the Yogācāra school - also known as Cittamātra).

Soteriology

‘Just as the Buddha Śākyamuni studied under the Buddha Kāśyapa, so do the masters and disciples living now; therefore, the treasury of the eye of the true dharma [transmitted from Śākyamuni to Mahākāśyapa] has actually been passed down to us from heir to heir. The correct life of the buddha dharma is nothing but this correct transmission. Because the buddha dharma is thus correctly transmitted, [the masters and disciples] are each the direct heir of the [Buddha's] bequest³.

Dōgen Zenji, regarded as the founder of the Japanese Sōtō Zen school and pre-eminent representative of Ch’an/Zen Buddhism, unequivocally dismissed the ‘rash’ and ‘demonic’ (*The Way of the Buddha*, see note 3) interpretation of his contemporaries who insisted in speaking of a ‘Zen School’, mistaking ‘branches and leaves’ as the ‘root’.⁴ Dōgen

³ Dōgen Zenji, *The Way of the Buddha* (Butsudō), in *Treasury of the Eye of the True Dharma* (*Shōbōgenzō*), Book 44, translated by Sōto Zen Text Project, <http://www.stanford.edu/group/scbs/sztp3/index.html>, 17th February 2007, >Translations>Treasury of the Eye of the True Dharma> 44 *Butsudō* 佛道 [The Way of the Buddha](http://www.stanford.edu/group/scbs/sztp3/translations/shobogenzo/translations/butsudo/pdf/translation.pdf) (Bielefeldt)> translation: <http://www.stanford.edu/group/scbs/sztp3/translations/shobogenzo/translations/butsudo/pdf/translation.pdf>, square brackets as in the text.

⁴ Ibid., ‘Transmitted from the Western Heavens to the Eastern Earth [i.e., from India to China], [this tradition spans] 18,000 *li*; transmitted from [Śākyamuni's]

categorically rejected any labels for his teachings, firmly stating that the *Dharma*, correctly transmitted, is none other than the *Dharma* bequeathed by the Buddha.⁵

From this perspective, it becomes interesting and stimulating to attempt, from a historical and philosophical point of view, to identify the possible roots of the ‘profound and subtle’ *Dharma* of which Dōgen is speaking. I would venture to argue that these roots might be understood as:

- ❖ anti-dogmatic stance
- ❖ the ‘doctrine’ and intuitive, living experience of *Śūnyatā* - Emptiness (rooted in and equated to the canonical concept of Conditioned Arising by Nāgārjuna⁶)

lifetime to the present, [it continues] over two thousand years. A group that has not studied this principle rashly and mistakenly says [the following]. The treasury of the eye of the true dharma, the wondrous mind of nirvana [sic], correctly transmitted by the buddhas and ancestors, they rashly call the "Zen school." They call the ancestral masters "Zen ancestors"; they call the students "Zen masters" or "Zen preceptors"; or they call themselves "lines of the Zen houses." These are all but "branches and leaves" that have taken a biased view as the "root." When, throughout the Western Heavens and Eastern Earth, from ancient times till the present, there has not been the term "Zen school," rashly to call oneself [by this term] is to be a demon who would destroy the way of the buddha, an unbidden enemy of the buddhas and ancestors.

⁵ Ibid., ‘Thus, in correctly transmitting the work of the way of studying Buddhism, we should not see or hear the term “school.” What buddha after buddha and ancestor after ancestor bequeath and correctly transmit is the unsurpassed bodhi of the treasury of the eye of the true dharma. The dharma possessed by the buddhas and ancestors has all been bequeathed by the buddha; there is no further additional dharma. This principle is the bones of the dharma, the marrow of the way.’

⁶ See Harvey 1990: 99: ‘In the Śūnyatāvādin perspective, each phenomenon lacks an inherent nature, and so all are said to share an empty “non-nature” as their “nature”. Thus one *dharma* cannot ultimately be distinguished from another: the notion of the “sameness” of *dharmas*. Their shared “nature” is “emptiness (*śūnyatā*)... “Emptiness”, though, is not some ultimate basis and

- ❖ the emphasis on practice - the path to deliverance from suffering and delusion (ultimately caused by spiritual ignorance, *avidyā/avijjā*), which will be analysed later

I agree with Arena⁷ that an essential teaching of the historical Buddha (Dōgen Zenji would probably say ‘of the *Dharma*’) is his anti-dogmatic stance, his rejection of all fixed *dṛṣṭis/diṭṭhis*, his choice of treading the Middle Way, avoiding the treacherous jungle of speculative views, especially those related to any illusory Self, chief cause of *duḥkha/dukkha*⁸.

Any doctrinal view, especially as it becomes rigid, fixed and dogmatic, and insofar as it turns into an object of attachment⁹, must be done away with, freeing the path for a direct, intuitive, experiential realization of *Nirvāṇa/Nibbāna*.

If Nāgārjuna (and Mahāyāna Buddhism in general) reiterated the Buddha’s original and pioneering anti-dogmatic stance, it is with Ch’an/Zen that we witnessed a radical, uncompromising, at times even iconoclastic burning up of all views in the fire of non-dual *prajñā pāramitā*, the perfect wisdom that has ‘gone beyond’ the delusion of duality, opposition and separation. Ch’an/Zen, therefore, emphasised the Indian

substance of the world, like the Brahman of the Upaniṣads. *It implies that no such self-existent substance exists: the world is a web of fluxing, inter-dependent, baseless phenomena.* Nāgārjuna, in fact, equates emptiness with the principle of Conditioned Arising; for it logically leads to it (MK. ch. 24, v. 18).

⁷ Arena 1992: 21.

⁸ See Harvey 1990: 53: ‘Besides craving, two other important causes of *dukkha* are “views” (*diṭṭhi*) and “conceit” (*māna*). The first refers to speculative view-points, theories or opinions, especially when they become dogmatic, narrowing a person’s whole outlook on life. Such views are seen as hidden forms of self-assertion...’

⁹ See Williams with Tribe 2000: 247, note 22.

Mahāyāna teachings of the Perfection of Wisdom (*Prajñā Pāramitā*) literature, especially (though probably an apocryphal Chinese text¹⁰) the total letting go of our mind's tendency and 'predilection to the formulation of views (*dr̥ṣṭi/diṭṭhī*), to conceptual proliferation (*prapañca/papañca*), and to the manufacture of conceptual constructs (*vikalpa*)¹¹, that is so quintessentially advocated by the Heart Sūtra (*Hṛdaya Prajñā-pāramitā Sūtra*):

Therefore, O Śariputra, because of his nonattainment, a bodhisattva relies on the perfection of wisdom and stays free from mental hindrances. And because of this freedom from mental hindrances, he is unafraid, he moves beyond error, and he is assured of attaining nirvāṇa... gate, gate, paragate, parasamgate, bodhi svāhā (gone, gone, gone beyond, utterly gone beyond: enlightenment!).¹²

The *Platform Sūtra on Meditation and Wisdom*, ascribed to the Sixth Patriarch, Hui-neng (638-713), an influential text as well as an important indication of what Ch'an became¹³, went even further in encouraging all practitioners to 'let the mind be free-flowing and without attachment... to be without dwelling on anything'¹⁴. It admonished them to abide in 'no-thought (*mu-nen* or *mu-shin* in Japanese), avoiding attachment to and entanglement with any views and labels¹⁵, which is reminiscent of the

¹⁰ See Jan Nattier's research in Nattier 1992: 153-223, referred to in our course materials, BUD01, session 19, section 1.

¹¹ Gethin 1998: 235.

¹² *The Heart Sūtra*, in Strong 2002: 144.

¹³ BUD01, session 27, section 2.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ 'But the Way should flow freely: why should we clog it like that [with thoughts, labels and false divisive discrimination]? When the mind is not attached to events, then the Way flows freely; it is when the mind is attached that it gets all tangled up... My good and learned friends, my teaching from the very beginning has established no thought as its doctrine, no label as its

Yogācāra rejection of the illusory duality between subject and object and of the Diamond Cutter (*Vajracchedikā*) Perfection of Wisdom Sūtra's 'unsupported thought'¹⁶. Interestingly, the latter text, according to Ch'an tradition, is regarded as having triggered Hui-neng's first awakening.

Ch'an/Zen tradition, moreover, radically emphasised the 'doctrine' and intuitive, living experience of *Śūnyatā* – Emptiness. It utilised and stretched the Mahāyāna soteriological¹⁷ notion of *Tathāgatagarbha*, the seed of and the potential for awakening in all sentient beings, bestowing upon it a more cosmological flavour: One Mind as our true nature, empty reality to which we ought to awaken, freeing us from the ignorance, and therefore bondage, of mental activities¹⁸. Faith in intrinsic enlightenment became even more crucial for Ch'an/Zen: 'penetrate whatever comes before you! Have faith in your own activity

substance, and no attachment as its foundation', *The Platform Sūtra on Meditation and Wisdom*, in Strong 2002: 301.

¹⁶ BUD01, session 27, section 2.

¹⁷ I agree with Williams (2000:160-166) that the notion of *tathāgatagarbha* is originally intended as a religious exhortation, as an encouragement to realise one's own potential to be a Buddha, rather than as an ontological concept of some absolute reality. The metaphors found in the *Tathāgatagarbha Sūtra* (see Grosnick 1995: 92-106) clearly indicate that the *Tathāgatagarbha* should be seen as a precious, valuable and noble seed, which must be uncovered, with practice, from defilements (*kleśas*). I agree with Prof. Harvey (see BUD01, session 23, section 1.3) that there is no necessary contradiction (at least in Indian Mahāyāna) between the interpretation of *Tathāgatagarbha* as inner potentiality and that of hidden pre-existent Buddhahood. 'It may be that the intention of this juxtaposition of similes is to suggest that one must first uncover the *tathāgata-garbha*, as a Buddha-potential, and *then* mature it to Buddhahood by bringing out qualities implicit in it' (*ibid.*). A similar interpretation can be drawn forth from the *Mahāparinirvāṇa Sūtra*, with its complex interplay between *Tathāgatagarbha* as future potentiality (seed), inner essence already and actually present, yet unseen due to ignorance (diamond and pearl) and lack of fixed, permanent nature (emptiness). See Liu 1982: .63-94.

¹⁸ See the *Awakening of Faith*, referred to in Williams 1989: 109-112.

right now; there is no other thing¹⁹ said Master Lin-chi, encouraging his disciples to intuitively understand and realise that they are 'the One', that they are not lacking anything in their immediate activity, right here - right now.

I appreciate that certain Ch'an interpretations²⁰ may seem to veer perilously towards some sort of metaphysical/ontological position, which would be highly problematic, if not utterly contradictory, within the Indian Madhyamaka 'Middle Way' approach. However, I feel inclined to view the language of 'One Mind' as a poetical attempt to express the ineffable non-duality of the experience of Awakening, rather than a philosophical, metaphysical or ontological definition of Reality. This 'One Mind' is another way to say Emptiness, non-duality, *Prajñā Pāramitā* that goes beyond any attempt to reify and substantialise life into an abstract concept of unity as a safe, permanent and comforting ground to our experience²¹. This will result more evident as we turn towards analysing Ch'an/Zen practice, especially through the lens of Dōgen Zenji.

To sum up the first two points concerning soteriology – the anti-dogmatic stance and the 'doctrine' and intuitive, living experience of *Śūnyatā* – Emptiness, I believe that Ch'an/Zen radicalised the Indian (especially Mahāyāna) soteriological understanding of liberation and Awakening as the living experience of relinquishing attachment to

¹⁹ *Seeing into One's Own Nature* by Lin-chi, in De Bary 1969: 231.

²⁰ Especially the *Awakening of Faith in the Mahāyāna*, see Williams 1989: 109-112.

²¹ See a fruitful and though-provoking discussion in Peter Harvey, BUD01 discussion folder 27, Re: Sn. 27 Group 2 Report, posting no. 2360, Wednesday 31 January 2007.

ignorant views, abiding in a state of free-flowing communion with ‘the way things are’.

Practice

Intimately and inextricably connected with soteriology, we will now examine how Ch’an/Zen radicalised Indian Buddhist practices in order to guide practitioners towards utter and final freedom, towards experiencing Awakening.

‘Our life can be seen as a crossing of a river. The goal of our life’s effort is to reach the other shore, Nirvana [sic]. “Prajna Paramita”[sic], the true wisdom of life, is that in each step of the way, the other shore is actually reached. To reach the other shore with each step of the crossing is the way of true living²²’.

I believe that Ch’an/Zen was committed to a revolution (in its etymological meaning of *revolvere*, ‘to turn back’) in the understanding and practice of Awakening, claiming to go back to the Buddha’s original teaching. Ultimately, Ch’an/Zen regarded practice and Awakening as being not different and the *Dharma* as ‘only everyday life with nothing to do²³’. The path is simply ‘seeing one’s own nature’ (*kenshō*), seeing our ‘original face’²⁴, not a gradual, step-by-step ladder to climb in order to achieve something beyond us. Dōgen Zenji pushed this idea to its extreme logical and religious consequences by stating that meditation, or better *zazen shikantaza*, is **not a method** to become a Buddha, it is the simply the

²² Suzuki 1970: 65.

²³ *Seeing into One’s Own Nature* by Lin-chi, in De Bary 1969: 225.

²⁴ Harvey 1990: 275-6.

expression of innate Buddhahood. *Shusō ittō/shushō ichi-nyo*: enlightenment and practice are one²⁵.

Dōgen's own existential *kōan* was to fathom the reason and rationale for practice if realization was already present. His answer was that practice exhibited, expressed, manifested and actualized our innate Buddha nature.

Dōgen's interpretation of the identity between practice and Awakening became supremely influential in Zen Buddhism, as it was exemplified by the late Sōtō Zen Master Shunryu Suzuki Roshi:

[Before Bodhidharma] 'Zen practice was a kind of training to gain enlightenment. Actually many people today are practicing [sic] zazen with this idea. But this is not the traditional understanding of Zen. The understanding passed down from Buddha to our time is that when you start zazen, there is enlightenment even without any preparation. Whether you practice [sic] zazen or not, you have Buddha nature. Because you have it, there is enlightenment in your practice. The points we emphasize are not the stage we attain, but the strong confidence we have in our original nature and sincerity of our practice. We should have practice [sic] Zen with the same sincerity as Buddha. If originally we have Buddha nature, the reason we practice [sic] zazen is that we must behave like Buddha'.²⁶

In this passage, Suzuki clearly reiterated Dōgen's understanding and faith is the non-duality between practice and Awakening, reinterpreting all past Buddhist ideas and practices in this new light. Although this re-interpretation might be rather problematic for Early Buddhism, especially if we consider the Theravādin position, I believe that Dōgen simply radicalised the Indian Mahāyāna and the early Chinese ideas of Buddha nature, taking them to their extreme logical and religious consequences²⁷.

²⁵ Cook 1983: 17.

²⁶ *Suzuki 1970: 99-100.*

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 22.

Dōgen boldly stretched the Indian Mahāyāna ideas of non-duality of *saṃsāra* and *Nirvāṇa*, as expressed in the Perfection of Wisdom literature. If all dharmas are empty of own nature (*svabhāva*)²⁸, they are ultimately the same and cannot be distinguished. We can only find the quality of emptiness (*śūnyatā*) in them - which is not to be understood, however, as an underlying ultimate substance or essence (those who mistake *Śūnyatā* as a theory are called incurable)²⁹. If all *dharmas* are the same and non-dual, ‘a surprising implication of this is that at the ultimate level, “all *dharmas* are enlightenment³⁰”. Consequently, all *dharmas* are seen as ‘unborn, like *Nirvāṇa*: *Nirvāṇa* and *saṃsāra* as not different³¹’. All dualities are to be rejected as illusory and the veil of ignorance must be pierced through with the flaming sword of *prajñā pāramitā*³². Therefore, at the ultimate level of truth (*paramārtha*), there is no distinction between practice and realisation: all differentiations are skilful means (*upāya kauśalya*) that pertain to the level of conventional truth³³.

It is understandable, therefore, why Ch’an/Zen, especially Dōgen Zenji, emphasised the practice of sitting - *zazen shikantaza*: sustained, wholehearted, purposeless (*mushotoku*) sitting³⁴, constantly actualising

²⁸ See BUD01, session 19, section 6.1.

²⁹ See BUD01, session 19, section 6.3.

³⁰ Peter Harvey in BUD01, session 19, section 6.5.

³¹ See BUD01, session 19, section 6.6.

³² ‘When freed from doubts the Bodhisattva carries on this practice, As skilled in wisdom he is known to dwell, All dharmas are not really there, their essential original nature is empty. To comprehend that is the practice of wisdom, perfection supreme’, in ‘Verses on the Perfection of Wisdom’ (*Ratnagūṇa-saṃcaya-gāthā*) chp 1-2, translated by Conze 1973: 12.

³³ On the issue of conventional (*saṃvṛti*) and ultimate (*paramārtha*) truth, see Williams 1989: 69-72.

³⁴ ‘In the pursuit of the Way [Buddhism] the prime essential is sitting (*zazen*)... Just to pass the time sitting straight, without any thought of acquisition,

one's own Buddhahood in daily exertion. Zazen is truly *jijuyū zanmai*, 'the samādhi that has the function of allowing the individual to enjoy his enlightened nature... the activity that actualises an already-existent enlightenment and applies it to the concrete affairs of everyday life'³⁵. All everyday activities, lived in total attentiveness and participation, are a living, dynamic manifestation of one's own original Awakening³⁶. That is the reason for Zen's ritualisation of everyday activities: manual work (*samu*), formal and liturgical eating, bathing, sleeping, dressing, moving around the temple, and so forth. Practice is always practice of Awakening, always authentication of one's own Buddha nature. *Busshō* (Buddha nature) is the opening (as a verb) to the rhythmical unfolding and concealing of life as *evenire*, inexhaustible e-vent (movement of coming out of 'emptiness' into the manifestation of 'form', as the *Hṛdaya Sūtra* puts it)³⁷. That's why there is so much emphasis on **practising** Awakening here and now, in every action of daily life, ritualising every

without any sense of achieving enlightenment – this is the way of the patriarchs', Dōgen Zenji, *Conversations of Dōgen*, in *De Bary* 1969: 371.

³⁵ Cook 1983: 21.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 24-4: 'Enlightenment, as Dōgen understood it, is nothing more than a profound at-oneness with the event at hand, in total openness to its wonder and perfection as manifesting absolute reality, and this at-one-ness in total openness is what is meant by samādhi'. Another interesting way of putting this could be: 'a profound-at-oneness with the impermanent-flow that Dōgen sees as "Buddha-nature". Of course as that enlightenment is part of the impermanent-flow, it is also "Buddha-nature"', Peter Harvey, BUD01 discussion folder 27, Re: Brahmanical-like ideas in Ch'an/Zen? posting no. 2342, Monday 29 January 2007.

³⁷ Peter Harvey, in the above-mentioned posting, interestingly remarked: 'but surely such an "opening" is something that a person sometimes experiences and sometimes does not. "Buddha-nature" as the flow of life is always there, but whether it is there in the fuller sense of a part of that flow, a person, being fully-with the flow, is something that needs practice'; a perfectly valid point that I would share and agree upon.

moment as sacred. It is interesting to note that this emphasis is reminiscent of the position found in the Mahāyāna *Vimalakīrti Nirdeśa Sūtra*, in which meditation is understood not only as the sitting posture of formal contemplation, but also as any everyday activity, carried out with complete attention and awareness³⁸. Once again, I believe that Ch’an/Zen boldly radicalised previous Mahāyāna ideas and practices.

I appreciate, however, that early Mahāyāna was undoubtedly characterised by an emphasis on a long, gradual path towards Buddhahood - the Bodhisattva-path- articulated into the development of six (or ten) perfections (*pāramitā*)³⁹. Admittedly, there is an undeniable tension between the unstructured⁴⁰ and sudden Ch’an/Zen approach and the more structured and gradual Bodhisattva path. However, I would argue that this tension is more due to historical than philosophical or soteriological reasons.

I agree with Harvey that the Bodhisattva path ‘is in many ways a new version of Buddhist ethics⁴¹’, a broadening of ethics: the ethics of ‘restraint or vow (*saṃvara*)’⁴², by following lay or monastic precepts, the ethics of ‘collecting wholesome states’ (*kuśala-dharma-saṃgraha*)⁴³,’ by practising the Bodhisattva perfections, and the ethics of ‘working for the

³⁸ See Arena 1992: 42.

³⁹ See BUD01, session 20, sections 6-9. The ten *pāramitā* are: *dāna* (generosity), *śīla* (morality/virtue), *kṣanti* (forbearance), *vīrya* (vigour/effort), *dhyāna* (meditation), *prajñā* (wisdom), *upāya-kauśalya* (skill in means), *prañidhāna* (determination/vow), *bala* (strength), *jñāna* (knowledge).

⁴⁰ For a detailed discussion on structured and unstructured models of the path, please see Rawlinson 1997: 96-131.

⁴¹ Harvey, P., in BUD01, session 20, section 4.

⁴² *Ibid.*, referring to such texts as the *Mahāyāna-saṃgraha* and Asaṅga’s *Bodhisattva-bhūmi*.

⁴³ *Ibid.*

welfare of beings (*sattvārtha-kriyā*⁴⁴), by actively helping them. I find it plausible to argue that the early Mahāyāna emphasis on gradual development of the Bodhisattva path was due to the emerging of this new aspiration **within** the context of the highly structured Mainstream Buddhism (so-called Śrāvakayāna)⁴⁵, thus following the gradual path/achievement paradigm, yet instilling a new motivation in it. Nonetheless, I would argue that, according to the *Prajñā Pāramitā Sūtras*, the Bodhisattva path soon became ‘emptied’: perfections are fully perfected when established in the wisdom of emptiness⁴⁶. The *Bodhisattva* knows that, ultimately, there are no ‘beings’ to be saved (just fluxes of empty *dharmas*), yet he has great compassion (*mahā karuṇā*) for them, because they experience ‘themselves’ as ‘suffering beings’. The path itself is therefore empty: no beings to be saved, no perfections to develop, ‘no *Dharma* to grasp’⁴⁷.

To sum up, I believe that the Perfection of Wisdom literature, with its radical ideas, became rather more influential for the development of Ch’an/Zen than the earlier Bodhisattva path stages, thus justifying my argument.

Language

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

⁴⁵ For a discussion on terminology for different vehicles, please see BUD01, Session 18, section 3.

⁴⁶ For instance, *dāna pāramitā*, the perfection of giving, is truly so when it is realised that: giver, gift and recipient are empty; there is no reward for giving; there are no beings to whom one can dedicate it; there is no enlightenment towards which one can dedicate it. See Conze et al 1995: 136-7, text 131: *The Perfection of Giving (Pañca-vimśati-sāhasrikā Prajñā Pāramitā Sūtra)*.

⁴⁷ See BUD01, Session 19, sections 6.7 and 6.8.

Let us now turn to how Ch'an/Zen radicalised Indian Buddhist practices and ideas on language, to show both continuity and innovation across the traditions.

Ch'an/Zen is well known for its paradoxical teaching style: puzzling private interviews with the master (*sanzen*), use of *kung-an/kōans*, shouts, blows, sudden actions, bewildering question and answers sessions (*mondō*), use of stories and parables to enable the practitioner to realise directly and intuitively his/her own nature. Despite its self-image and most modern interpretation of Ch'an/Zen practices as anti-linguistic and iconoclastic, I agree with Wright that 'discursive or rhetorical practices of classical Ch'an Buddhism constitute a highly developed and unique tradition'⁴⁸: they represent a self-aware and sophisticated tradition. I will follow Wright's argument, trying to point out how this sophisticated linguistic tradition is rooted in Indian Buddhism, both Mainstream⁴⁹ and Mahāyāna.

Ch'an/Zen intense preoccupation with language, its limits and yet its potential to trigger a religious transformation, is firstly evident in its 'rhetoric of strangeness'⁵⁰, where language and references become progressively more 'oblique, hinting, teasing, denying, challenging, but rarely explaining or stating the facts. Increasingly, the language of these texts embodies the "ungraspability" of the matters about which they speak'.⁵¹ This strangeness is reminiscent of the Mahāyāna fantastical,

⁴⁸ Wright 1993: 23.

⁴⁹ See note 45.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 26.

magical, esoteric, dramatic, inspired and highly metaphorical language, especially in the *Saddharmapuṇḍarīka Sūtra* (Lotus Sūtra)⁵².

Secondly, its ‘rhetoric of direct pointing’⁵³, relying on actions and ‘non-verbal signs, like ritual comportment and a language of gestures’⁵⁴, is an extension of Indian Buddhist emphasis on language and teaching as inadequate to express the truth, only functioning as pointers, as mediations, as rafts⁵⁵ to cross the ocean of delusion towards the shore of Awakening. Teachings are ‘fingers pointing to the moon’, to use a Ch’an/Zen’s beloved image; only a fool would look at the finger, rather than at the moon itself.

More significantly, it is with the ‘rhetoric of silence’⁵⁶, deafening, ‘disquieting and unnerving’⁵⁷, and with the ‘rhetoric of disruption’⁵⁸ that we can fully appreciate Ch’an’s debt to Indian Buddhism, especially in regards to its use of apophatic language⁵⁹, in the attempt to convey the ineffability of the experience of *Nirvaṇā* (*Nibbāna*). Ch’an/Zen continued and radicalised the tendency of speaking negatively about the experience of Awakening, aware of the impossibility to describe and analyse it logically and linguistically, since language is by its nature dualistic and

⁵² See, for instance, the parable of the Place of Jewels (Chapter 7), briefly quoted in Williams 1989: 149-150.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 27.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 28.

⁵⁵ Even the ‘*Dharma is for the purpose of crossing over and not for the purpose of holding on to*’ (*M.I. 134-5*)

⁵⁶ Wright 1993: 30.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 31.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

⁵⁹ For a discussion on cataphatic and apophatic use of language in Buddhism, especially in the Canon, see Gombrich, R., 2006 (unpublished), *What did the Buddha mean by “no soul”?*, *Lecture six of the series: 2006 SOAS Numata Lectures*, delivered at SOAS University, London, 14th November 2006.

representative (etymologically: re-presentare, vor-stellen, placing something in front, re-producing it), always mediating. For instance, in *Udāna* 80⁶⁰, the Buddha spoke of what *Nibbāna* was not, attempting, using poetical language, to enable his disciples to glimpse at the ineffable reality beyond words, concepts and linguistic constructs.

However, despite the intrinsic limitations of language, both Indian Buddhism and Ch'an/Zen endeavoured, through parables and metaphors, to twist and squeeze language to its maximum, so as to extract meaning, to create dislocation, 'evoke a disorientation and then reorientation of the reader's subjectivity⁶¹', ultimately clearing the way for a genuine opening to Awakening⁶². Well-known are the parables found in the *Lotus Sūtra*⁶³, sublime examples of a key teaching that Ch'an/Zen borrowed - radicalising it - from Indian Mahāyāna Buddhism: the concept of *upāya-kauśalya* (skill-in-means, or skilful means).

All Buddha's teachings are highly contextualised, adapted to his listeners and their individual capacity for understanding, true yet functional, relative and 'appropriate to the context in which they are given'⁶⁴. The Mahāyāna concept of *upāya-kauśalya* is itself 'built on the old idea that the Buddha had adapted the particular contents of his teaching to the temperament and level of understanding of his

⁶⁰ Ud. 80, *Vagga* 8, *Sutta* 1, quoted in Harvey, P., BUD01, Session 10, section 6.

⁶¹ Wright 1993: 32.

⁶² *Ibid.*, p. 34: 'only by being cast out of the security of knowledge and conventional belief will one awaken to the open space of illumination'.

⁶³ See, for example, 'The parable of the burning house', 'The parable of the Prodigal Son', 'The parable of the jewel' and 'the parable of the Place of Jewels', all quoted in Williams 1989: 148-150.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 143.

audience⁶⁵. Ch'an/Zen adopted and extensively used the teaching of *upāya-kauśalya* in its practices, especially in its use of *kung-an/kōans*. On the one hand, *kung-an/kōans* are used as focal points for concentration in meditative practice, aiming to channel the practitioner's energy into a kind of dynamic, 'active samādhi'⁶⁶. On the other hand, however, *kung-an/kōans* are also attempts to 'shipwreck the use of logic and language'⁶⁷, though this – and I agree with Strong⁶⁸ – seems to be a minority usage, a rather mystical view exaggerated by the interpretations of scholars such as D.T. Suzuki. The use of *kung-an/kōans*, therefore, seems to validate the idea that 'language is at the heart of human "illness"⁶⁹," yet, especially when used skilfully (*upāya-kauśalya*), 'it is also the "cure"⁷⁰. Ch'an/Zen use of language, rooted in the Mahāyāna concept of *upāya-kauśalya*, is thus 'fully situational⁷¹', aimed at bringing the practitioner to a transformational breakthrough, to the threshold of Awakening.

Furthermore, it is interesting to trace back to Indian Buddhist roots how Ch'an/Zen used metaphorical language, twisting⁷² the meaning of ordinary words to trigger the experience of Awakening. I believe, with

⁶⁵ Harvey 1990: 92.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 274.

⁶⁷ Strong 2002: 327.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

⁶⁹ Wright 1993: 34-5.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 35.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, p.36.

⁷² *Ibid.*, p. 27: 'Ch'an masters characteristically rejected an "otherworldly" understanding of their practice, preferring instead to experience the "way" in the midst of everyday life. But by setting academic prose aside and adopting the vocabulary of contemporary slang, they still did not speak "normally." Instead they **twisted** [bold mine] the slang of the time out of its particular representational hold. They spoke the common language of the moment in uncommon ways in order to undermine the norms and grounds embodied in it'.

Gombrich⁷³, that the Buddha himself, as he is presented in the *Pāli* Canon, was a masterful, unsurpassed language twister, superbly skilled not only at adapting his teachings to the situation and his audience, but, more significantly, an artist of infusing new meaning into accepted terms, sometimes even outrageously turning the common meaning upside-down. Gombrich refers to the Pāli concept of *pariyāya*⁷⁴ to explain this extraordinary ability of the Buddha in using *upāya-kauśalya*. The Buddha as a concept twister⁷⁵, therefore, seems to me the original root from which all Ch’an/Zen masters drew nourishment in their often paradoxical, unconventional, at times puzzling use of language. Yet again, I would argue that Ch’an/Zen simply radicalised an intrinsic tendency of Indian Buddhism of being highly pragmatic⁷⁶, taking it to its extreme consequences.

Finally, as far as language is concerned, I would like to mention Ch’an/Zen idea of mind- to- mind transmission, as it is portrayed in the story of Mahā-Kāśyapa; a ‘foundation myth⁷⁷’, a revealing attempt, I

⁷³ See Gombrich, R., 2006 (unpublished), *The Buddha’s invention of karma as an ethical principle: part one: Jain influence, Second Lecture of the series: 2006 SOAS Numata Lectures*, delivered at SOAS University, London, 17th October 2006.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.* ‘Literally this word means “way round” and so “indirect route”, but it refers to a “way of putting things”. The translation “circumlocution” will not quite do, because that wrongly suggests long-windedness or evasiveness. *Pariyāya* refers to metaphor, allegory, parable, any use of speech which is not to be taken literally’.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*: ‘As a creative thinker, he [the Buddha] played with some of those [Brahmanical] concepts and gave words new meaning – as we have seen in the case of karma’.

⁷⁶ See Gombrich, R., 2006 (unpublished), *The Buddha as Pragmatist, Ninth Lecture of the series: 2006 SOAS Numata Lectures*, delivered at SOAS University, London, 5th December 2006.

⁷⁷ Harvey, P., BUD01, session 27, section: introduction.

believe, to root Ch'an/Zen transmission and lineage into the very beginning of the Buddha's historical teachings. Despite being an apocryphal story and a much later invention⁷⁸, it is highly indicative of Ch'an/Zen idea of their special transmission⁷⁹: a radicalisation of the Buddha's original teachings, firmly rooted into the Indian context of ideas and practices.

Conclusion

In this essay, I argued that Ch'an/Zen can be understood as a self-aware, sophisticated attempt to radicalise Indian Buddhist ideas and practices, in the sense of both utilising them – going back to the roots – adding to them and boldly going beyond them – in the sense of taking them to their extreme logical and religious consequences, rather than moving away from the tradition. I hope I have succeeded in emphasising the underlying continuity between Ch'an/Zen and Indian Buddhism, focusing primarily on how Ch'an/Zen radicalised Buddhist soteriology, practice and use of language, taking a 'backward step⁸⁰' to shine the light inwards.

I see Ch'an/Zen as a masterful and successful living response to one of the key issues in Buddhist **tradition**: the need to elaborate adequate languages to translate the universally accessible experience of Awakening into peculiar historical, geographical and cultural milieu, rooted in a particular religious, scientific and philosophical tradition. If the *Dharma* (and the experience of Awakening) is atemporal, timeless and universal,

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

⁷⁹ See the following late saying attributed to Bodhidharma: 'A special transmission outside the scriptures; Without depending on words and letters; Pointing directly to the human mind; Seeing the innate nature, one becomes a Buddha', in Harvey 1990: 154.

⁸⁰ See note 1.

its manifestation (*Sāsana*) is invariably and necessarily historical, with its conditioned ways, doctrines and practices. Therefore, the unconditioned *Dharma* is always historically mediated by language, categories, concepts, metaphors, according to the evolution of mankind and its cultural development.

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