

Jon McAlister

June 13th, 2001

RS18: Zen Buddhism

The Platform Sutra Revisited

In response to the schism between Southern and Northern schools of Ch'an in 8th century China, Tsung-mi attempted to unify the teachings of Hui-neng and Shen-hsiu by re-interpreting their models for attaining enlightenment based on his own context-dependent interpretations of the terms "sudden" and "gradual", as well as an enumerative system of the various paths to enlightenment. He goes on to claim that Hui-neng's teachings do actually include a gradual component, which can be verified upon a closer read of the Platform Sutra. Tsung-mi also presents a preferred model for attaining enlightenment that is based on sudden enlightenment followed by a gradual cultivation that culminates in enlightenment, which he then reconciles with the teachings of Hui-neng. Apart from Tsung-mi's successful attempts to reconcile sudden and gradual teachings, his model as a whole is criticized because it attempts to rationalize the Dharma enlightenment. Tsung-mi's model is also criticized because it melds together various Buddhist teachings into a conglomerate model, and thus loses the more intricate understandings of each tradition.

In the Platform Sutra, the main distinction that is presented between sudden and gradual methods is that the sudden method is superior to the gradual because it is the quicker method for those who are capable of such enlightenment; also, the Southern teaching emphasizes realization, while the Northern teaching emphasizes the gradual aspects. In the

Platform Sutra, the sudden teaching is superior because it is faster for those who are capable of accomplishing it:

“Good friends, in the Dharma there is no sudden or gradual, but among people some are keen and others dull. The deluded recommend the gradual method, the enlightened practice the sudden teaching. Once enlightened, there is from the outset no distinction between these two methods” (Yampolsky, 137)

The connotations of this passage are clear: the gradual method of the North is not necessary and only practiced by those who are deluded as to how they should practice. Hui-neng acknowledges here that both teachings are equivalent to one who is enlightened. From this, he assumes that the remaining criterion with which to compare the two is time, and thus that the sudden teaching is superior. The key doctrinal difference between the two teachings is that the Northern school’s gradual method involves a gradual process of acquiring enlightenment, whereas the Southern school’s sudden method involves coming to the realization that one is from the beginning already enlightened. As Heinrich Dumoulin writes,

“Shen-hsiu’s school of Gradualness also accounts for an experience that is perceived suddenly, at once; but (at least in the reports of Hui-neng’s school) it teaches a way of gradual ascent as the practice progresses. Enlightenment is ‘acquired’ by way of practice. This ‘acquiring’ which implies some sort of causation, is unknown to Hui-neng” (Dumoulin, 49).

Hui-neng’s teachings consistently emphasize that the original Buddha nature is within all of us, and all we need to do is realize this become awakened. Although Shen-hsiu’s teachings

do include a sudden enlightenment in the path, this sudden phase is just not emphasized. Whereas Hui-neng focuses on the sudden realization, Shen-hsiu focuses on the gradual cultivation. The goal of the sudden enlightenment Hui-neng describes is to overcome dualistic thinking and any thoughts that prohibit one from realizing that he is the Buddha. Thus, the continual polishing which Shen-hsiu refers to in his poem is completely discarded in Hui-neng's teachings: "In the quietistic type of meditation, the obscurities are continually wiped clean; but for the mind awakened to seeing into its true nature, the obscurities prove to be no hindrance" (Dumoulin, 48-49). It is important to note that it is not just the case that these two schools are talking about the same path, and just emphasizing different parts. For the Southern school, just accomplishing the sudden enlightenment by itself will save you, "Good friends, if you meet awakening, [Buddha]-wisdom will be achieved" (Yampolsky, 135). For the sudden method Hui-neng professes, sudden enlightenment really is enough to achieve Buddhahood, and this accomplishment can be achieved in a sudden manner, "If you stop thinking of the myriad things, and cast aside all thoughts, as soon as one instant of thought is cut off, you will be reborn in another realm" (Yampolsky, 138). The proof which the Southern school seems to rely on is the enlightenment of the spiritual genius Hui-neng. Hui-neng justifies spreading the sudden path because he himself achieved enlightenment suddenly, "At midnight the Fifth Patriarch called me into the hall and expounded the Diamond Sutra to me. Hearing it but once, I was immediately awakened, and that night I received the Dharma" (Yampolsky, 133). This is another key difference between the Southern and Northern schools. Whereas Hui-neng's own life contrasts Indian Buddhism doctrines conceptions of the path to enlightenment, Shen-hsiu bases his teachings heavily on

Indian Buddhist doctrines. However, the confusion that now arises is the question of what sudden and gradual really mean. Is it the meditation practice for the two that is sudden or gradual? Is it the actual realization that is sudden or gradual? Are there sudden and gradual components in each of the two teachings? If so, what parts are sudden and why can one component be sudden in one school and gradual in another school? These are some of the questions which Tsung-mi attempts to clarify.

In his attempt to explain the difference between the sudden and gradual teachings, Tsung-mi presents a model which defines the meaning of sudden and gradual in various contexts, and goes on to promote a path which consists of sudden enlightenment followed by gradual cultivation. He provides an enumeration of all the possible combinations that exist to attain enlightenment, and then locates both the teachings of Shen-hsiu and Hui-neng within this larger framework. As Peter Gregory writes, “He tries to reconcile conflicting interpretations by uncovering a more comprehensive framework in which they can all be harmoniously sublated” (Gregory, 308). The justification behind building such an elaborate system is that, “In doing so, he maintains that no one position has an exclusive claim to the truth, but that it is only when all of them are taken together that we can arrive at a true understanding of something as complex as the nature of religious experience” (Gregory 282). The actual enumeration of his system is based on a duality between sudden and gradual components of the path. However, if both sudden and gradual are possible at each step in the phase, then the distinction between the two is no longer so grave, “He contends that ‘sudden’ (tun) and ‘gradual’ (chien) are complementary rather than mutually exclusive terms” (Gregory 282). It is important to note that each of Tsung-mi’s possible paths to

enlightenment are indeed valid paths, and all are compatible with the teachings of the original Buddha, Sakyamuni: “He maintains that in a doctrinal context the terms ‘sudden’ and ‘gradual’ refer to methods by which the Buddha taught, not to separate teachings” (Gregory 282). More importantly, Tsung-mi differentiates between the meaning of sudden and gradual for specific stages of enlightenment: initial insight, final insight, and the cultivation in between, “Tsong-mi’s analysis of the different contexts in which the terms ‘sudden’ (tun) and ‘gradual’ (chien) operate does much to make sense out of what often seems to be a hopelessly confused and confusing issue” (Gregory 308). Tsung-mi characterizes Hui-neng’s personal path as sudden initial insight followed by sudden cultivation leading to enlightenment. Alternatively, Tsung-mi characterizes Shen-hsiu’s taught path as sudden enlightenment followed by gradual cultivation resulting in enlightenment. An important consequence of this differentiation is that there is a distinction between meditative practices before and after one’s initial insight. Tsung-mi does not consider pre-initial insight meditation in his enumeration, but it is evident that he regards this part of the Buddha training as inconsequential, “For Tsung-mi it is only after such an experience that true Buddhist practice can begin. There is thus a fundamental difference between practices engaged in prior to this experience and those engaged in after it” (Gregory 286). Throughout his system, the common model which Tsung-mi abides by involves initial insight, followed by cultivation on the initial insight, and concluded by enlightenment, as Peter Gregory explains:

“Tsong-mi points out that in the first three cases the term ‘enlightenment’ refers to the enlightenment of complete realization (cheng-wu), in contradiction to the enlightenment of initial insight (chieh-wu) Because one first has an initial experi-

ence of enlightenment, one engages in religious practice based on that experience, and, as soon as one's practice is completed and one's task perfected, one realizes the fulfillment of enlightenment a three staged model of the path: (1) initial insight (chieh-wu), (2) gradual cultivation (chien-hsiu), and (3) final enlightenment (cheng-wu)" (Gregory 284).

Despite presenting this enumeration of possible methods with which to attain enlightenment, Tsung-mi also emphasizes one particular path, which he claims, is superior to the others. Tsung-mi later directly reconciles this path with the teachings of Hui-neng, "His theory of sudden enlightenment followed by gradual cultivation integrates the experience of sudden enlightenment into a comprehensive vision of a progressive path of spiritual cultivation, one that emphasized the importance of a sudden 'leap' of insight within a larger philosophy of progress." (Gregory 308). Also, it is important to note that Tsung-mi is most definitely a supporter of Hui-neng, and most supported the school of Hui-neng during the fight over the lineage: "The Southern line is the true line in which the robe and dharma have been uninterruptedly transmitted over successive generations from the time when the feat master Hui-neng of Ts'ao-ch'i received the essence of Bodhidharma's teaching" (Gregory 280). Despite this, Tsung-mi does provide a new interpretation into Hui-neng's teachings based on his system. He then goes on to unite his own preferred path of sudden enlightenment followed by gradual cultivation with Hui-neng's teachings.

According to Tsung-mi's criteria, the sudden teaching from the Platform Sutra is not inherently better for all because it is quicker, but rather is prescribed for those who are already near the end of the path. Also, the notion that sudden enlightenment is based solely

on the initial realization is dissolved. The connotation of deluded is exaggerated, and merely refers to people who are still near the beginning of the path. Consider this excerpt:

“What is meant by 'gradual' and 'sudden'? The Dharma itself is the same, but in seeing it there is a slow way and a fast way. Seen slowly, it is the gradual; seen fast it is the sudden [teaching]. Dharma is without sudden or gradual, but some people are keen and others dull; hence the names 'sudden' and 'gradual'”
(Yampolsky, 163).

Here the connotation of dull must be ignored, and treated as a descriptive term which defines one who is not far along the path of enlightenment. The connotation is no longer that the Northern school is for the dunces, but that it is rather for the novices. Tsung-mi's distinction between meditation before and after the initial enlightenment is also present in the Platform Sutra, “If you activate your mind to view purity without realizing that your own nature is originally pure, delusions of purity will be produced” (Yampolsky, 139). Clearly, under Tsung-mi's model, the differences between the Northern and Southern school become differences in technique, and not differences in ability, “'Sudden' thus refers to the method by which the Buddha directly revealed the truth to persons of the highest spiritual aptitude the gradual teachings, on the other hand, refer to those teachings that the Buddha addressed to persons of average or inferior capacity” (Gregory 283). Thus, the sudden teaching is not inherently better than the Northern teaching simply because it is quicker. Hui-neng appears to offer a teaching that will help those souls who have already progressed far along the path, and have the ability to finish within their lifespan. It is important to note that the Platform

Sutra was intended to be a religious text to be kept within the Southern school, and was not intended for laypersons to read.

Also, according to Tsung-mi's analysis, Hui-neng's teaching does contain a gradual component. Hui-neng's path will be quick for those who have already progressed in past lives, but gradual for others. Tsung-mi's interpretation of Hui-neng involves a gradual stage in which the initial enlightenment is fully integrated into one's own self. As Peter Gregory writes,

“Tsung-mi followed Shen-hui [, disciple of Hui-neng,] in criticizing the Northern line for its sole emphasis on a graduated meditative regimen to the neglect of sudden enlightenment altogether. Yet, while he maintained that Shen-hui's teaching was 'sudden,' he held that it contained a gradual component as well. In fact, he described Shen-hui's teaching in regard to practice and enlightenment as advocating the necessity of a sudden experience of enlightenment to be followed by a gradual process of cultivation, in which the practitioner's initial insight into his true nature is systematically deepened until it becomes integrated into every aspect of his life” (Gregory, 280-1).

This arises from the assertion that enlightenment is neither cheap nor free, which is the case in Indian Buddhism. Tsung-mi's interpretation of Hui-neng is that of getting rid of our human behaviors and adopting the Buddha nature is like breaking a bad habit. Even if we know how, we still need to incorporate and actually practice the method to do so. Specifically, Tsung-mi claims that, “gradual cultivation is thus the process by which one's initial insight

is integrated into one's personality" (Gregory 289). Also, Tsung-mi takes special care in describing his system to argue against the main proof and justification behind the Southern school, the spiritual life of Hui-neng. Tsung-mi claims that Hui-neng had already traversed the gradual path in his past lives, and thus, was already far along the path to enlightenment: "Tsung-mi points out, however, that this is only possible because such persons have already engaged in a long process of spiritual cultivation in past lives - hence there is a gradual component in this position as well" (Gregory 285). Thus, for Tsung-mi, the actual life of Hui-neng is explicated by his past lives, and the practice which Hui-neng teaches to others will not be enough for them to achieve enlightenment. Thus, Tsung-mi reconciles his own preferred path with Hui-neng's path through emphasizing the sudden enlightenment in both, and the gradual cultivation that is not mentioned explicitly in the Platform Sutra.

Tsung-mi's conclusion that the path offered by Hui-neng includes a gradual component can also be seen directly from the Platform Sutra upon a second reading. Just as one pure thought can set one person into enlightenment, any one impure thought will drive that person out of enlightenment. Thus, attaining what Tsung-mi would call sudden enlightenment does not guarantee that you will remain enlightened unless you practice according to Hui-neng your entire life. Therefore, even though "one flash of wisdom destroys ten thousand years of ignorance" (Yampolsky 142), the practitioner must always work to remain enlightened, because "if but one instant of thought contains ignorance, then prajna is cut off: (Yampolsky 147). Furthermore, "An instant of thought of evil will result in the destruction of good which has continued a thousand years" (Yampolsky, 143). The implications of these statements is rather drastic. Even if one obtains sudden enlightenment, he must

still work for the rest of his life to maintain it and not lose it. Also, the Platform Sutra sets forth the notion that becoming a fully realized Buddha is equivalent to breaking a bad habit, “Although these people have prajna wisdom and are not different from men of great knowledge, why is it that even though they hear the Dharma they are not awakened? It is because the obstructions of their heterodox views are heavy and the passions deep-rooted” (Yampolsky, 150). Therefore, inside all of those unenlightened individuals there exists deep-rooted obstructions which must be gradually removed, and which cannot be resolved by some sudden enlightenment. One very intriguing remark from Hui-neng concerns the traditional religious model of a redemptive truth which offers salvation: “It is useless to make a confession in words before the Buddhas. In my teaching, forever to engage in no action is called repentance” (Yampolsky, 145). Here, “no action” means to never again to evil. The similarities here to Christianity are striking, and there is a definite implication of a lifetime commitment to the teachings of Hui-neng, otherwise the sudden enlightenment will be lost. The existence of this life-long gradual component to the path in Hui-neng can be gleaned from the popular remark, “The very practice of Buddha, this is Buddha” (Yampolsky, 168). That is, the sudden enlightenment you obtain tells one that the Buddha nature is inside of him already, and that what follows is a gradual cultivation in which you must practice being a Buddha. Specifically, the Buddha-like state you achieve after the sudden enlightenment is itself the gradual cultivation that you practice for the rest of your life, and if you ever deviate from being like the Buddha, then you deviate from your gradual cultivation, and thus lose your sudden enlightenment.

Despite successful attempts to reconcile sudden and gradual teachings, Tsung-mi’s

attempts to reconcile Hui-neng's teachings, his model as a whole is criticized because it attempts to rationalize the Dharma enlightenment. Specifically, the subitists, those who follow the sudden teaching of the Southern school, claim that Tsung-mi is attempting to build a rational and structured model to define the essence of Buddha nature. This is a clear contradiction since the Buddha nature is not expressible in words and letters, or in structured human thought for that matter.

“But this is precisely what the subitist claims can never be done, for there is a profound sense in which enlightenment can never be accounted for, because to do so is to place it, as Tsung-mi does, within a conceptual structure with its own structures of rationality. The subitist insists that enlightenment is an experience of breaking through all such structures - and for that reason it is ultimately ineffable. To say anything at all about enlightenment is to impose structure upon it, no matter how deftly or obliquely done” (Gregory, 308)

Another specific concern of the subitists is that if anyone were to take Tsung-mi's model seriously, and attempt to practice with it, they would assuredly fail, “If the practitioner becomes attached to any map as being a true picture of reality, it becomes an obstacle thwarting the very realization of that to which it is intended to lead” (Gregory 310). Tsung-mi's model is also criticized because it melds together various Buddhist teachings into a conglomerate model, and thus loses the more intricate understandings of each tradition, “Tsung-mi's characteristic tendency to find the most comprehensive framework into which all other perspectives can be subsumed must be taken into consideration when evaluating his

accounts of the various Ch'an traditions. That is to say, his characterizations are schematic rather than descriptive: locating a teaching within a larger conceptual scheme often seems to be more important than giving a textured description of it" (Gregory 306). Thus, any possible application of Tsung-mi's model outside of his scholarly unification of the sudden and gradual practices is truly worthless.

Therefore, although Tsung-mi provides a very elaborate model for the different paths to enlightenment, as well as the numerous stages in which any person must proceed through on their path, the only actually interesting part of Tsung-mi's analysis is his reconciliation of the "sudden" teaching of Hui-neng with the "gradual" teaching of Shen-hsiu. Particularly, Tsung-mi's conclusion that Hui-neng's path involves a gradual component is perhaps his most important contribution to the way that Chinese Buddhists thought about sudden and gradual enlightenment. Having said that, it is important to note that more detailed information about the actual teachings of Hui-neng and especially Shen-hsiu is scarce since the majority of the known texts from this era come only from the Tun Huang collection, which includes no direct source from the school of Shen-hsiu, the eventual loser in the battle for the patriarchal lineage.

Works Cited

Dumoulin, Heinrich. *Zen Enlightenment: Origins and Meaning*. NY, Tokyo: Weatherhill, 1979.

Gregory, Peter. "Sudden Enlightenment Followed by Gradual Cultivation: Tsung-mi's Analysis of Mind", in Gregory, ed., *Sudden and Gradual Approaches to Enlightenment in Chinese Thought*, pp. 279-317. *Studies in East Asian Buddhism* 5. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1987.

Yampolsky, Philip. *The Platform Sutra of the Sixth Patriarch*. NY: Columbia, 1978