China Root

TAOISM, CH'AN, AND ORIGINAL ZEN

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CHINA ROOT

INTRODUCTION

What happens if we dismantle all of our human conceptual constructions, all of the explanations and assumptions that structure consciousness and orient us and define us as centers of identity? To do that not in the abstract, but at the level of immediate experience. What would that leave us? What might we discover about ourselves at levels deeper than the contingent histories and thoughts that define us as identity-centers? And what would it mean about the texture of everyday experience?

This dismantling is the adventure of Ch'an (Jap. Zen) Buddhism as originally practiced in ancient China, and its primary revelation is the larger self or "original-nature" that remains after the deconstruction. The awakening that Ch'an cultivated was 見性: "seeing original-nature" (*chien-hsing*; Jap. *kensho*). And in cultivating this awakening, Ch'an's sage-masters operated like a wrecking-crew disassembling every possible story or explanation, idea or assumption or certainty. The Ch'an conceptual world sounds like a constellation of answers, a clear account of consciousness and Cosmos and their interrelation, and it is. But in the end, Ch'an dismantles all of our answers, including its own, to leave a new way of being.

The T'ang Dynasty Ch'an master Yellow-Bitterroot Mountain (Huang Po: died 850) compared this dismantling to "clearing away shit-piles." It is the cultivation of a remarkably rich and even ecstatic kind of freedom—though the nature of that liberation depends upon the stories and ideas that are deconstructed, hence the need to understand them first. Ch'an is not simply about establishing a mind of tranquility: that happens, but in unexpected ways. Instead, by emptying consciousness of the isolated identity-center we take for granted in our daily lives, Ch'an intends to liberate us into a larger identity that is woven integrally into landscape, earth, and Cosmos. This is Ch'an awakening: a radical kind of liberation, a freedom that transforms everything from identity and immediate everyday experience to death itself. And it demands a wild and fearless mind.

The Ch'an adventure answers a sense of rootless exile caused by a fundamental rupture between oneself and everything else—a sense of alienation that structures consciousness much more radically in our modern world than in ancient China. The great sangha-case (koan) collection *No-Gate Gateway* (1228 C.E.) poetically describes this as living "a ghost's life, clinging to weeds and trees." It is a sense of not being present in one's immediate life-experience or of being caught in some inside radically separated from the vast outside of empirical reality, together with a suspicion that it needn't be this way, that some kind of immediacy and wholeness is possible.

That wholeness was the original human condition, a fact central to Ch'an thought and practice. Ch'an is, as we will see, a return of consciousness to this primal cultural level: hence, Ch'an's cultivation of awakening as a reinhabiting of the "original-nature" of consciousness. Humankind's primal wholeness began to fade during the Paleolithic, when people

slowly became self-reflective and aware of themselves as separate from the rest of existence. It was a period when humans were still rooted in natural process and yet separate enough to produce a rich artistic and spiritual tradition. But that incipient separation eventually became a rupture in agrarian Neolithic culture, when people began settling into villages (permanent enclaves separate from the landscape) and began controlling "nature" in the form of domesticated plants and animals: a detached instrumentalist relationship to the world.

The advent of alphabetic writing completed this transformation. In primal cultures, language (existing only as thought or speech) and all mental process moved the way everything else moved: appearing, evolving, disappearing. There was no fundamental separation between subjective and objective realms. But with writing, people could inscribe thoughts, making them seem permanent: they could come back to those thoughts later, and others could read those thoughts in distant times and places. Writing seems to defy the fleeting nature of our inner reality, creating the illusion of an immaterial and timeless subjective world, a mental realm of permanence that is separate from the world in a radically ontological way. Writing made mental processes seem changeless for the first time. And compounding this, words in alphabetic languages have an arbitrary relationship to the world of things, reinforcing this separation of subjectivity and the world. All of this soon led to a mythologization of that inner world as a "soul" or "spirit," part of dualistic cosmologies and theologies that divide the world into a spirit realm (soul/heaven) and a material realm (body/earth). That established the things of this world as *objects* of transcendental thought, as ontologically out there and other than us. It replaces the immediate experience of things in and of themselves with knowledge and explanation of them.

This process of rupture entailed a shift from the Paleolithic's gynocentric worldview to an androcentric worldview. In China, the process was complete by the historical beginnings of Chinese civilization in the Shang Dynasty (1766–1040 B.C.E.), which was indeed fiercely patriarchal. In the Shang, it was believed that all things were created and controlled by a male and all-powerful monotheistic deity very like the sky-god of Judeo-Christian theology, a deity known simply as Lord-Celestial. Everyone's ancestors lived on in a spirit realm, and they had power to influence earthly events, so people prayed and offered sacrifices to them. Lord-Celestial was the all-powerful chief of these ancestors, and he was the high ancestor of the Shang's male rulers. Hence, Lord-Celestial provided those rulers with a transcendental source of legitimacy through lineage. And it gave them god-like power, because through prayer and ritual they could influence Lord-Celestial's shaping of events. All aspects of people's lives were thus controlled by the emperor: weather, harvest, politics, economics, religion, etc. Indeed, as in the traditional West, people didn't experience themselves as substantially different from spirits, for the human realm was simply an earthly extension of the spirit realm.

Eventually, the Shang emperors grew tyrannical, and the dynasty was overthrown by the Chou Dynasty (1040–223 B.C.E.), whereupon the Chou rulers reinvented Lord-Celestial as an impersonal "Heaven," thus ending the Shang's claim to legitimacy by lineage. The Chou rulers justified their rule by claiming they had the "Mandate of Heaven," so when their rule was in turn overthrown, the last semblance of theocratic cosmology crumbled, leaving no organizing system to structure society. Philosophers like Lao Tzu and Confucius (c. fifth–sixth centuries B.C.E.) struggled to invent a new philosophical

framework that could replace the spiritualistic system with a humanistic one based on empirical reality. One aspect of this transformation was the reinvention of Heaven as an entirely empirical phenomena—the generative cosmological force that drives the ongoing transformation of natural process—thereby secularizing the sacred while at the same time investing the secular with sacred dimensions: what we today would call a form of pantheism.

This transition moment was soon superseded by an entirely secular concept: Tao (道), which was essentially synonymous with "heaven," but without the metaphysical implications. *Tao* is the central concept in Taoism as formulated in the *I Ching* (c. second millennium B.C.E.) and Lao Tzu's *Tao Te Ching* (c. sixth century B.C.E.)—poetic texts that are the seminal works in Chinese spiritual philosophy, and the deepest root-source of Ch'an thought and practice. Indeed, Taoist ontology/cosmology supply the conceptual framework that shapes Ch'an at its foundational levels. As we will see in the first chapter, Lao Tzu uses the term *Tao* to describe the empirical Cosmos as a single living tissue that is inexplicably generative in its very nature. Belonging to this magical tissue made the world of immediate experience wholly mysterious and wondrous and sufficient in and of itself. There was no longer a need to invest reality with imagined dimensions of the sacred or divine.

Lao Tzu's vision apparently derives from a primal tradition that persisted outside the theocratic power structures of the Shang and Chou dynasties. Even here at the beginning of Chinese philosophy, there was a longing for a primal past. And indeed, like the *I Ching*, the *Tao Te Ching* seems to have been largely constructed from fragments handed down in an oral wisdom-tradition. As such, it represents a return to the earliest levels of proto-Chinese culture: to the Paleolithic, it seems,

where the empirical Cosmos was recognized as female in its fundamental nature, as a magisterial and perpetually generative organism in constant transformation. In fact, Lao Tzu often refers to Tao as *female* or *mother.* This is the root of a remarkable fact: high Chinese civilization, for all its complexity and sophistication, never forgot its origins in a gynocentric primitive. Indeed, the primitive was the very thing responsible for the distinctive nature of its complexity and sophistication. Ch'an is integral to that cultural complex, and only when it's seen this way can it (or contemporary Zen) really be understood.

American Zen generally sees its tradition as a stream of Buddhism that began in India, passed through China (with some significant developments), then through Japan (where it became known as Zen, the Japanese pronunciation for the *Ch'an* ideogram, and developed further), and then twelve centuries later passed on to America, where the tradition is primarily shaped by its Japanese antecedent. This narrative involves a stunning project of cultural appropriation in which Ch'an is presented as if it were Japanese: the names of Chinese Ch'an masters have been widely rendered in Japanese, as have important terminology including *zen, koan, kensho, satori, mu.*

That story isn't wrong, but it leaves out just about everything that matters to Ch'an. It would be more accurate to say that when Buddhism arrived in China during the first century of the current era, it was fundamentally reinterpreted and reshaped by Taoist thought, its more abstract metaphysical sensibility becoming grounded in an earthly and empirically based vision. The result of this amalgam, which began to take shape from the third into the fifth centuries C.E., is Ch'an. And in this transformation, Buddhism is so transformed by

Taoist thought that, aside from a few institutional trappings, it is scarcely recognizable as Buddhism at all.

But it may be still more accurate to simply say that the influence of Buddhism pushed native Chinese philosophy to a new level of clarity and intensity, for the originators of Ch'an essentially adopted aspects of Buddhism (texts, ideas, practices) that they found useful in enriching their own Taoist understanding, while reconceiving them fundamentally in Taoist terms. Most important among these imported Buddhist elements was a central focus on the nature of empty-mind, consciousness emptied of all content, a focus cultivated through a highly developed practice of empty-mind meditation known as *dhyana*. As we will see, Ch'an found *dhyana* meditation a useful stage in training, but at more advanced levels reconceived and in the end dismantled it, returning to an enriched version of ancient Taoism's concept of meditation. And Buddhism functions more generally as a conceptual framework to dismantle—part of the Ch'an adventure of razing all conceptual constructions. This imperative to disassemble ideas was certainly present in the forms of Buddhism that arrived in China, part of why it appealed to China's artist-intellectuals. But Ch'an deconstruction operates very differently because it was primarily inherited from early Taoism. In the end, Buddhism is only a scrim on the surface of Ch'an. At depth, Ch'an's deconstructive project extends a tradition of demolition that was the essence of Taoism from its origins in the *Tao Te Ching*, and the end result of the dismantling is defined by the earthy Taoist/Ch'an conceptual framework.

So Ch'an was less Buddhism than a rebellion against Buddhism. And in the end, it is most accurately described not as Buddhism reconfigured by Taoism, but as Taoism reconfigured by a Buddhism that was dismantled and discarded after

the reconfiguration was complete. This is how ancient China's artist-intellectual class saw it: Ch'an as a refinement and extension of Taoism. Indeed, the more Ch'an is seen at the deep levels essential for awakening, the more Taoist is looks; while the more it is seen at shallow or institutional levels, the more Buddhist it looks.

The relationship also evolved historically. The earlier we look in Ch'an's development, the more we find references to imported Buddhism, its texts, terminologies, rituals, practices: because Chinese intellectuals were struggling to understand what this new system of thought offered to their own Taoist framework, and also because the more conventional- and institutional-minded among them wanted to empower themselves with a venerable and exotic authority. On the other hand, the later in Ch'an history we look, the more assured thinkers and practitioners were in their practice and understanding, the less frequent such references are, and the more problematized they are. In mature Ch'an, such references were generally mere storytelling or poetic play—often used to engage conventionally minded students who were steeped in Buddhist terminologies and concepts. But it was more fundamentally part of a strategy to set up Buddhism as a framework of understanding and certainty to be ridiculed and dismantled. For the deconstruction of such conceptual structures is Ch'an's most essential characteristic, its radical path of liberation.

In part, this reconfiguration and incorporation of *dhyana* Buddhism into Taoism was the result of translation. The first and most important aspect of this is what we might now call poor translation. Sanskrit terms were generally (mis-)translated into native Taoist terms, hence transforming Indian Buddhist concepts into Taoist concepts. The second way translation domesticated imported Indian concepts derives from the unique

fact that Chinese is not alphabetic, so it cannot simply incorporate Sanskrit terms into Chinese. Instead, it must transliterate them with Chinese ideograms having similar sounds. In Chinese, each available sound is used to pronounce many different ideograms (unlike English where each word is generally pronounced differently from all other words)—so there were choices for each Sanskrit sound needing transliteration. In making those choices within their own Taoist philosophical framework, scholars often chose meanings that added new, more native Chinese dimensions to the Indian concepts. *Samadhi*, meaning in Indian Buddhism "consciousness emptied of all subjective content," becomes in Chinese the suggestively elemental "three-shadowed earth" (三昧地). *Tathagata*, a name for Buddha as the "thus-come or thus-perfected one," becomes "existence-tissue arrival" (如來). And *dhyana* ("meditation") becomes *Ch'an* (禪) itself, which originally meant "altar" and "sacrifice to rivers-and-mountains," and we will see that its etymology suggests "the Cosmos alone simply and exhaustively with itself."

Ch'an's native sources can also be seen in the literary forms taken by Ch'an texts, which grew out of forms developed much earlier in the Chinese tradition. In their fragmentary and paradoxical nature, Ch'an texts continue the forms developed by early Taoist sages in the *Tao Te Ching* and *Chuang Tzu* (sixth and fourth centuries B.C.E.). Texts recording the teachings of Ch'an masters, often as interactions with students, continue a form developed in the Confucian *Analects* (sixth century B.C.E.) Philosophy through storytelling (rather than abstract system-building) is typical of all those ancient Chinese books, as it is in the literature of Ch'an. And finally, Ch'an's poetry and poetic compression in prose grew out of a culture for which poetry was central and universally practiced by artist-intellectuals.

As a refinement of Taoism, Ch'an came to define the conceptual framework of China's artist-intellectuals. It became that framework's most clear and distilled and highly developed expression. Ch'an masters were generally a part of that artist-intellectual class. They received the same classical education, and they associated broadly with artist-intellectuals who themselves generally practiced Ch'an in some form. The Ch'an monastery was a permeable intellectual center, allowing fluid movement in and out. Monks often visited artist-intellectuals, and those artist-intellectuals often visited monasteries to see friends, practice, and consult Ch'an masters. In addition, when traveling far from home, they often stopped at monasteries, which functioned as inns.

Like all aspects of high Chinese culture (philosophy, the arts, government), Ch'an was exclusive to the artist-intellectual class, and it had little in common with the myriad forms of religious Buddhism practiced by the illiterate masses. And at its core levels, it was little concerned with the Bodhisattva ideal of compassion and social responsibility, as that was the realm of Confucianism. (The mind of artist-intellectuals had two aspects in ancient China: the socially engaged Confucian, which they pursued in their work as government bureaucrats; and the spiritual Taoist, which they pursued in their private lives.) These artist-intellectuals saw Ch'an not as religion or an institution dedicated to social work, but as a philosophical practice that cultivates profound insight into the empirical nature of consciousness and Cosmos. And their creative work was deeply influenced by Ch'an. In fact, poetry, calligraphy, and painting were broadly considered forms of Ch'an practice and teaching.

The historical process of cultural transformation that created Taoism and Ch'an is very similar to what has happened in the West over the last few centuries: the collapse of a monotheistic framework, passing through a phase of pantheism (Deism and Romanticism), and ending in our current secular scientific worldview. China was almost three thousand years ahead of the West in this regard, and their innovations are informative because they are radically free of the fundamental assumptions that still shape Western thought. The Chinese model is particularly relevant to our contemporary situation for a number of reasons. First, it is empirically based, insights coming not from belief or abstract speculation, but from close attention to the deep nature of cosmological process and our everyday experience. And so, it comports with modern scientific understanding, while adding an empirical phenomenology far more powerful and nuanced than anything found in Western culture. Second, it is profoundly gynocentric, a cosmology that sees the Cosmos as female in its essence and whose deep sources lie in oral wisdom-traditions of gynocentric Paleolithic cultures. Third, it is what we might now call "deep-ecology," meaning it weaves human consciousness into the "natural world" at the most fundamental levels, a radical alternative to our culture's traditional assumptions.

These elements define the awakening offered by Ch'an Buddhism. That awakening is a radical freedom that opens when conceptual structures are deconstructed, when we "cut off the mind-road," as *No-Gate Gateway*'s poetic image-making puts it: "if you don't cut off the mind-road, you live a ghost's life, clinging to weeds and trees." Hence the famous Ch'an principle that understanding resides outside words and ideas. But the nature of that freedom is in fact defined by the very words and ideas Ch'an dismantles: the native

philosophical assumptions that shaped consciousness for ancient China's artist-intellectuals, and that are largely absent for Western practitioners. But it appears that in its migration to Japan and, over a millennium later, from Japan to America, Ch'an's native philosophical framework was largely forgotten, for it is all but absent in modern American teaching texts and translations of the original Ch'an literature. (This problem and how it is addressed in this book are explained in the Reader's Note that follows this Introduction.)

We know the original Ch'an teachings through texts. Even when translated accurately, the teachings in those texts can seem hermetic and perplexing—but once we understand the Taoist/Ch'an framework, they become much more forthcoming and approachable. Ch'an's essentials are summarized in a remarkably concise poem attributed to Bodhidharma (died c. 530),* who is by legend the First Patriarch of Ch'an and a seminal figure in the origin of Ch'an as a body of thought and practice:

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* As with most originary figures of Chinese philosophy—Lao Tzu, Chuang Tzu, Confucius—a number of seminal Ch'an figures appear to have evolved over time. Texts recording their lives and teachings only took shape after their deaths, and those texts tended to grow and change over time as new accounts were edited and rewritten. It's impossible to know how accurate or inaccurate such records are: huge numbers of ancient Chinese texts were lost, not to mention taken by students, so direct connections to contemporaneous accounts cannot be ruled out. Also, Ch'an was largely an oral tradition, so a great deal of a teacher's record could have been handed down orally with reasonable accuracy. In any case, those constructed figures and their teachings are in fact what defines the Ch'an tradition. So, this book will speak of them and the records of their teachings the way they came to be understood by the Ch'an community in ancient China: as representing actual historical figures and their teachings.

A separate transmission outside all teaching
and not founded in fine words of scripture,

it's simple: pointing directly at mind. There,
seeing original-nature, you become Buddha.

教	外	別	傳
teaching	outside	separate	transmission
不	立	文	字
not	founded	elegant	words
直	指	人	心
direct	pointing	person	mind
見	性	成	佛
see	original-nature	become	Buddha

But to understand this, we must understand why Bodhidharma is saying these things, and just what he means by "transmission," "mind," "original-nature," and even "Buddha." Such understanding requires that we read the poem within Ch'an's native philosophical framework. Most fundamentally, that framework is Taoist ontology/cosmology, the native intellectual inheritance taken for granted by Ch'an's original practitioners. As such, it suffuses original Ch'an teaching. And tellingly, it is rarely discussed directly in Ch'an texts because the ideas were quite simply the shared assumption. But so much of Ch'an teaching *enacts* the insight of that assumed framework, for Ch'an practice was about understanding that framework not as abstract ideas, but as actual immediate experience. That meant "seeing original-nature" (見性), the term that appears as the definition of awakening not just in

the last line of the Bodhidharma poem, but throughout the tradition.

China Root describes this native framework of ideas, each chapter addressing in the simplest possible way one key dimension of Ch'an thought and practice. The book also tries to show how those ideas were systematically dismantled by Taoist/Ch'an masters, and how it is this very dismantling that leads to the liberation of awakening. Understanding Zen in its ancient Ch'an form can only transform Zen practice. Once reinvested with its Taoist/Ch'an roots, it becomes not just straightforward and accessible, but also dynamic with the fertile energy of earth and Cosmos. And those roots transform generic "Zen perplexity" into an earthy mystery that can easily be inhabited in daily life. For while the central thrust of Zen practice is to be immediately present in one's life, rather than living lost in the isolate realm of thought, Zen's native Taoist/Ch'an framework adds profound and unexpected dimensions to that presence, opening the possibility of weaving consciousness into landscape, earth, Cosmos.

Ancient Chinese poems speak of mountains having roots: here is the bedrock of Zen, its *China Root*.

READER'S NOTE

THE PRIMARY PROJECT OF THIS BOOK IS A DIRECT AND philosophical one: to describe the native conceptual framework of Ch'an in ancient China, to make it available to contemporary philosophical understanding and spiritual practice. This native understanding and practice of Ch'an is largely missing in contemporary American Zen because that conceptual framework was mostly lost in Ch'an's migration from China through Japan to America. Indeed, that conceptual framework appears already lost in Japan, for little trace of it appears in the writings of the great Japanese scholar D. T. Suzuki, whose many books introduced Zen to the Western world. The reasons for this are surely complex and beyond the scope of this book. But as a generalized beginning toward that understanding, it could be said that Japan's cultural proclivity was toward paring things down to elegant essentials, a minimalist aesthetic defined by simplicity and order, stillness and emptiness. Japan sent an army of cultural figures to China beginning in the eighth century (just after the Sixth Patriarch) to master and bring to Japan all of Chinese culture: arts, philosophy, even the language itself. Over the centuries that followed, this adopted culture seems to have been pared down to

its minimalist essentials in every field. China's poetry based on landscape images is purified in haiku to the briefest imagistic gesture. Much the same thing happened in painting, calligraphy, architecture, and even the tea ceremony, where a formalized ritual of tranquil emptiness replaced China's relaxed Taoist practice. An it appears much the same thing happened to Ch'an, its philsophically complex and messy earthiness giving way to clean framework of stillness and order—the institutional Zen that migrated to America and Europe.

An unavoidable secondary task for this book is to document how the various aspects of Ch'an's native understanding are misrepresented or altogether absent in the literature of American Zen. It is true that Ch'an/Zen is described as direct teaching from master to student outside of words and ideas. But again, the nature of such teachings and their goal of enlightenment is in fact defined by words and ideas, the conceptual framework within which they operate—and that framework has little to do with original Ch'an. It would be impossible to examine the private teachings of all modern American Zen teachers, but the absence of original Ch'an in the entire literature of American Zen, including all books by Zen teachers, seems good evidence that it is absent from those direct teachings as well.

To avoid disrupting *China Root*'s primary philosophical project, this secondary task is addressed in the Appendix. The near absence of original Ch'an in books about Zen (many by Zen masters) is a simple fact, and could only be documented by citing the entire literature. But Ch'an's absence in contemporary Zen can be tellingly documented in the modern translations of original Ch'an texts (many also done by Zen teachers). The Appendix compares many of the translations in this book (all of them my own) with the standard translations that have

shaped contemporary Zen, to show in detail how Ch'an's conceptual framework is fundamentally misrepresented or simply lost in the translations. Translations that have comparisons in the Appendix are indicated with reference numbers.

On a larger scale, I have already translated the most widely used sangha-case (koan) collection, *No-Gate Gateway* (*Wu Men Kuan*), because it displays the whole Taoist/Ch'an conceptual framework especially well, using the root terms and concepts extensively. The intent was to show Ch'an returned to its native philosophical ground, a project that I explicitly address in the book's introduction and apparatus. The distortions of previous translations can be seen by comparing passages of philosophical interest. And future translations will continue this reclamation of original Ch'an, including first a companion to this volume: a "Sourcebook of Original Zen." This sourcebook will contain selections from Ch'an's essential texts, thereby presenting Ch'an's native conceptual framework in its own words. It will also trace *China Root*'s historical argument through texts that show how Ch'an's native conceptual framework begins not in Indian Buddhism but in the early Taoist texts, and how that framework evolved through proto-Ch'an texts and on into mature Ch'an.

Finally, a note on names. Artist-intellectuals in ancient China adopted names having meanings that somehow represented their natures. This was strikingly true in the world of Ch'an, where the names adopted are especially colorful and philosophically revealing. Names are therefore translated here, rather than the usual strategy of leaving them in their untranslated romanized form (another way modern Zen translations fail to render the native world of Ch'an).

I

道

Tao

Virtually all aspects of Ch'an's conceptual framework are anticipated in Taoism's seminal texts: *I Ching*, *Tao Te Ching*, *Chuang Tzu*. Much like the distinction between Ch'an and religious Buddhism, there were two forms of Taoism: religious Taoism that was practiced primarily by the illiterate masses; and philosophical Taoism, the form that artist-intellectuals took seriously and that evolved into Ch'an. This philosophical Taoism is best described as a spiritual ecology, the central concept of which is Tao, or "Way." *Tao* originally meant "way," as in "pathway" or "roadway"—a meaning it has kept. But Lao Tzu and Chuang Tzu, the seminal Taoist thinkers, redefined it as a generative cosmological process, an ontological path*Way* by which things come into existence, evolve through their lives, and then go out of existence, only to be transformed and reemerge in a new form.

Tao represents one of the most dramatic indications that conceptually Ch'an is an extension of Taoism, because the term *Tao* is used extensively at foundational levels in Ch'an with exactly the same meaning. In fact, Ch'an practitioners were often called 道流: "those who follow Tao," or more

literally, "those who flow along with Tao." Bodhidharma states it quite simply: "Tao is Ch'an" (see p. 91 for the entire passage). But Tao is generally read in contemporary Zen to mean the Buddhist "way" of understanding and practice that leads to awakening—which is sometimes correct, but only sometimes. And when it is read as the philosophical concept, it is understood as some kind of vague mystical reality, perhaps only available to the awakened. But in fact, Tao in its philosophical sense is a clearly defined and straightforward idea that isn't difficult to understand. And indeed, the failure to understand Tao is perhaps the first and most fundamental way in which the original understanding of Ch'an is lost in contemporary Zen.

To understand Tao, we must approach it at its deepest ontological and cosmological level, where the distinction between Absence (無) and Presence (有) arises, foundational concepts that also frequent Ch'an texts (and are entirely lost in modern translations). Presence is simply the empirical universe, which the ancients described as the ten thousand things in constant transformation; and Absence is the generative void from which this ever-changing realm of Presence perpetually emerges. Lao Tzu describes it succinctly like this:

> All beneath heaven, the ten thousand things:
> it's all born of Presence,
> and Presence is born of Absence.[1]

In anticipation of fuller discussions to come, it's important to understand here that Absence is not some kind of metaphysical dimension: it is instead simply the empirical Cosmos seen as a single generative tissue, while Presence is the Cosmos seen as that tissue individuated into the ten thousand distinct things constantly giving birth to new things.

In its primal generative nature, this cosmology assumes a more elemental experience of time. Not linear, the familiar metaphysical river flowing past, nor even cyclical, as time in primal cultures is imprecisely described—it is instead an all-encompassing generative present that might be described as an origin-moment/place, a constant burgeoning forth in which the ten thousand things emerge from the generative source-tissue of existence: Absence burgeoning forth into Presence. And as we will see in many different ways, inhabiting this origin-moment/place is the abiding essence of Ch'an practice.

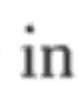
Tao as an ongoing *Way* is simply an ontological description of natural process, perhaps manifest most immediately in the seasonal cycle: the pregnant emptiness of Absence in winter, Presence's burgeoning forth in spring, the fullness of its flourishing in summer, and its dying back into Absence in autumn. And it is visible as the deep subject matter of Chinese landscape paintings, an art form that arose with Ch'an historically and was generally considered a method of Ch'an practice and teaching. This emptiness is especially evident in the painting on the following page by Eight-Mountain Vast (Pa Ta Shan Jen), one of the most idiosyncratic of China's great painters and also a Ch'an teacher. The empty space in such paintings—mist and cloud, sky, lakewater, even elements of the landscape itself—depicts Absence, the generative emptiness from which the landscape elements (Presence) are seemingly just emerging, or into which they are just vanishing. (For an extensive account of how landscape paintings manifest Taoist/Ch'an understanding, see my book *Existence: A Story*.)

At such ontological and cosmological depths, Taoist and Ch'an thinkers struggle to find accurate descriptions and explanations. As we will see over and over, concepts inevitably overlap and blur together, emphasizing different aspects of

Pa Ta Shan Jen (1626–1705): *Landscape after Tung Yüan* (1693).
Freer-Sackler Gallery, Washington

the same fundamental concept. Absence is hard to distinguish from Tao, it just shifts the emphasis a bit. And there is another fundamental concept that also describes Tao or Absence: *ch'i* (氣). 氣 is often described as the universal life-force breathing through things. But this presumes a dualism that separates reality into matter and a breath-force (spirit) that infuses it with life. That dualism may be useful as an approach to understanding; but more fully understood, *ch'i* is both breath-force and matter simultaneously. Hence, it is nothing other than Tao or Absence, emphasizing its nature as a single tissue dynamic and generative through and through, the matter and energy of the Cosmos seen together as a single breath-force surging through its perpetual transformations.

This sense of reality as a dynamic breath-force tissue is reflected in the Chinese language itself, and so operates as an unnoticed assumption in ancient Chinese consciousness. There is no distinction between noun and verb in classical Chinese. Virtually all words can function as either. Hence, the sense of reality as verbal: a tissue alive and in process. This includes all individual elements of reality, such as mountains or people, and contrasts with our language's sense that reality is nominal, an assemblage of static things. A noun in fact only refers to a temporal slice through the ongoing verbal process that any thing actually is.

In addition, all ideograms are based on "radicals": base-elements from which a range of related words are constructed. For instance, there are hundreds of words constructed by adding various elements to the radical "water," which like most radicals is pictographic in its original form:  , showing the rippling current of a stream or river. This system embodies the sense of interconnectedness we find in Taoism's description of reality, and the sense shared throughout Taoist/Ch'an

thought that fundamental principles permeate the tissue of existence.

Sage wisdom in ancient China meant understanding the deep nature of consciousness and Cosmos, how they are woven together into a single fabric, for such understanding enables us to dwell as integral to Tao's generative cosmological process. This is the awakening of Ch'an: "seeing original-nature." As we will see, the essence of Ch'an practice is moving always at the generative origin-moment/place, for it is there that we move as integral to existence as a whole. The seminal Sixth Patriarch Prajna-Able (Hui Neng: 638–713) gave this a radical form when he said: "You can see the ten thousand dharmas within your own original-nature, for every dharma is there of itself in original-nature." He was using *dharma* to mean the things and processes that make up our Cosmos, and so was expressing an idea prefigured as far back in Chinese philosophy as Mencius (fourth century B.C.E.), who said: "The ten thousand things are all there in me. And there's no joy greater than looking within and finding myself faithful to them."

Ch'an recognized it is the presumption of a self that precludes our dwelling as integral to Tao's generative cosmological process, for self as identity-center is the structure that isolates us as fundamentally separate from the world around us. In that dwelling, we identify not with an isolate identity-center self, but with Tao in all its boundless dimensions. This is an understanding that begins with Lao Tzu, for whom liberation from the isolate self reveals the true nature of self as integral to the cosmological process of Tao: "If you aren't free of yourself / how will you ever become yourself." And in that liberation, altogether different from Buddha's transcendental extinction of self in nirvana, we find a radical freedom that is the focus of both Taoist and Ch'an practice.

禪

Meditation

CH'AN PRACTICE WAS NOT SIMPLY ABOUT CULtivating an abstract understanding of Taoist ontology/cosmology and the nature of consciousness; it was about actually living that understanding as a matter of immediate experience. And at the center of Ch'an practice was meditation. Indeed, *Ch'an* (禪), a transliteration of the Sanskrit *dhyana*, simply means "meditation." (The original pronunciation of 禪 was *dian*, which makes more sense as a transliteration; but as with most Chinese words, the pronunciation changed over time.) The term was adopted as a name because Ch'an focuses so resolutely on meditation practice as the primary path to awakening.

The philosophical Taoism of Lao Tzu and Chuang Tzu was reenergized eight centuries after its origins by a philosophical movement known as Dark-Enigma Learning, which arose in the third century C.E. when Buddhism was becoming a major influence in Chinese culture. Its two major figures, Wang Pi (226–249) and Kuo Hsiang (252–312), articulated their thought in the form of commentaries on the seminal Taoist classics: *I Ching*, *Tao Te Ching*, *Chuang Tzu*. In these commentaries,

they emphasized and deepened the ontological and cosmological dimensions of those seminal texts, and it was those dimensions that blended with newly imported Buddhism to create Ch'an. Or perhaps more accurately: newly imported Buddhism gave the Taoism of Dark-Enigma Learning an institutional setting and a form of actual practice.

In the official Ch'an legend, Bodhidharma brought Ch'an from India more or less fully formed around 500 C.E., but his teaching is clearly built from the traditional Taoist conceptual framework, a fact revealed most simply in the way he depends on terms and concepts central to that Taoist system. In fact, Ch'an's origins are found a century or two earlier when Buddhist artist-intellectuals began melding Buddhism and Dark-Enigma Learning, which was broadly influential among artist-intellectuals at the time. In this process, they gave first form to most of the foundational elements of Ch'an that we will encounter in the following chapters. First among these, perhaps, is meditation.

The full transliteration of *dhyana* was *Ch'an-na*, 禪那. Of the many possible graphs that could have been chosen to transliterate *dhyana*, these would have been chosen for their Chinese meanings. 那 enriches meditative experience with its meanings "tranquility" and "that," as in the immediacy of consciousness ("that") in "tranquil" meditative experience. But 那 was dropped in normal usage, leaving 禪, a graph in which we can already begin to see the rich earthly and cosmological depths of Ch'an, for its pictographic etymology returns us to Taoist cosmology. And indeed, although it was the aspect of newly imported Buddhism most important to the development of Ch'an, *dhyana* meditation was reconceived according to China's native Taoist framework.

The 禪 graph divides into two elements: 礻 (示 in its full form) on the left, and 單 on the right. 示 derives from  and the more ancient oracle-bone form . This image shows heaven as the line above, with three streams of light emanating earthward from the three types of heavenly bodies: sun, moon, and stars. These three sources of light were considered bright distillations, or embryonic origins, of *ch'i*, the breath-force that pulses through the Cosmos as both matter and energy simultaneously—the dynamic interaction of its two dimensions, *yin* and *yang*, giving form and life to the ten thousand things and driving their perpetual transformations. It's remarkable how contemporary this ancient Chinese account of reality feels—for although the terminology is different (and the moon is only secondarily a light/energy source), this ancient Chinese description of reality is basically the same as our current scientific account. In this contemporary account that we take for granted, rarely feeling how wondrous and even strange it actually is, stars are in fact the "embryonic origins" of reality. For in their explosive deaths, stars create the chemical composition of matter. And in their blazing life, they provide the energy that drives earth's web of life-processes.

The common meaning of  was simply "altar," suggesting a spiritual space in which one can be in the presence of those celestial *ch'i*-sources. And indeed, if we were at a Ch'an monastery in ancient China, we would have experienced meditation as such a space, infused with those cosmological dimensions. It was also a practice of scientific observation, close empirical attention to the nature of consciousness ("seeing original-nature") and its movements. As such, it was the most essential part of the Ch'an adventure, Ch'an's primary method of awakening understood as "seeing original-nature."

In bare philosophical outline, meditation begins with the practice of sitting quietly, attending to the rise and fall of breath, and watching thoughts similarly appear and disappear in a field of silent emptiness. From this attention to thought's movement comes meditation's first revelation: that we are not, as a matter of observable fact, our thoughts and memories. That is, we are not that center of identity we assume ourselves to be in our day-to-day lives, that identity-center defining us as fundamentally separate from the empirical Cosmos. Instead, we are an empty awareness that can watch identity rehearsing itself in thoughts and memories relentlessly coming and going. Suddenly, and in a radical way, Ch'an's demolition of concepts and assumptions has begun. And it continues as meditation practice deepens.

With experience, the movement of thought during meditation slows enough that we notice each thought emerging from a kind of emptiness, evolving through its transformations, and finally disappearing back into that emptiness. Here, already, a new Taoist dimension is added to Buddhist *dhyana* meditation. *Dhyana* meditation, the conventional Buddhist form that came to China, cultivates consciousness as a selfless and empty state of "non-dualist" tranquility. Etymologically, *dhyana* means something like "to fix the mind upon," hence meditation as fixing the mind upon emptiness and tranquility. This aspect of meditation was hardly unknown in ancient China, appearing for instance in this passage from the *Chuang Tzu*:

> You've heard of using wings to fly, but have you heard of using no-wings to fly? You've heard of using knowing to know, but have you heard of using no-knowing to know?
>
> Gaze into that cloistered calm, that chamber of emptiness where light is born. To rest in stillness is great good

> fortune. If we don't rest there, we keep racing around even when we're sitting quietly. Follow sight and sound deep inside, and keep the knowing mind outside.

But this must be seen in the Taoist context, as one aspect of meditative experience. And here at this stage in Ch'an meditation, we already find the Indian *dhyana* idea of meditation transformed by that context. We have moved beyond *dhyana*'s nirvana-tranquility and deep among Ch'an's cosmological and ontological roots in Taoism, inhabiting a generative origin-moment/place in the form of "that chamber of emptiness where light is born."

In Ch'an, the process of thoughts appearing and disappearing manifests Taoism's generative cosmology, reveals it there within the mind. And with this comes the realization that the cosmology of Absence and Presence defines consciousness too, where thoughts are forms of Presence emerging from and vanishing back into Absence, exactly as the ten thousand things of the empirical world do. That is, consciousness is part of the same cosmological tissue as the empirical world, with thoughts emerging from the same generative emptiness as the ten thousand things.

These ontological dimensions are suggested by the graph for *monastery*, where meditation took place: 寺. The pictographic elements of 寺 can be seen better in earlier forms such as 𡈼: a hand below (𠂤: showing wrist with fingers and thumb) touching a seedling above (屮: showing stem and branches growing up from the ground). This seedling image suggests "earth" as the generative source, so the graph's full etymological meaning becomes something like "earth-altar," a spiritual place where one "touches the generative."

Eventually the stream of thought falls silent in meditation,

and we inhabit empty consciousness free of the identity-center. That is, we inhabit the most fundamental nature of consciousness, known in Ch'an parlance as *empty-mind* or *original-mind*: *original* being 本, image of a tree (木, from earlier forms like  showing a trunk with branches spreading above and roots below) accentuated by a mark locating meaning in the roots. This appears to be the tranquil emptiness of *dhyana* meditation, an emptiness in which mind is a mirror reflecting through perception the world with perfect clarity. But Ch'an meditation reveals that original-mind/mirror to be nothing other than Absence, generative source of both thought and the ten thousand things, for it is also the source from which thoughts emerge. And indeed, a fuller definition of 本 is something like "original source-tissue": hence, "original source-tissue mind."

Sangha-Fundament (Seng Chao) and Way-Born (Tao Sheng) were the most important Buddhist intellectuals involved in the amalgamation of imported *dhyana* Buddhism and Dark-Enigma Learning. But perhaps the most concise and influential was Hsieh Ling-yün (385–433), a giant in the poetic tradition who was a very serious proto-Ch'an practitioner. Hsieh wrote a short essay entitled "Regarding the Source Ancestral," described as an account of Way-Born's teaching and apparently the earliest surviving Ch'an text, in part because it advocates the quintessential Ch'an doctrine of enlightenment as instantaneous and complete. This essay indicates that Hsieh had a profound grasp of Way-Born's ideas and confirms that he had probably undergone a kind of Ch'an awakening himself. In it, Hsieh dismisses the traditional Buddhist doctrine of gradual enlightenment because "the tranquil mirror, all mystery and shadow, cannot include partial stages." And from this comes a description of meditation's fundamental outline that takes

a decidedly Taoist form: "become Absence and mirror the whole . . ."

Though we will see it reappear and develop in a host of ways, Ch'an deconstruction is already complete here in Hsieh's essay, and all the elements of awakening are in play. For we see as a matter of immediate observational experience the awakening suggested by Lao Tzu when he said: "if you aren't free of yourself / how will you ever become yourself." In this, already, we come to the foundational shift in awareness that is crucial to Ch'an awakening as "seeing original-nature": the experience of oneself not as a center of identity inside its envelope of thought and memory, but as an empty mirror, the contents of which is wholly the world it faces. And more: "original-nature" as nothing less than Tao or Absence, the generative existence-tissue that is the wordless Cosmos whole. Indeed, Seventh Patriarch Spirit-Lightning Gather (Shen Hui)* described awakening as simply "seeing Absence" (見無),[2] a variation on the Ch'an term we have seen for awakening: "seeing original-nature."

At these cosmological levels, Ch'an meditation is anticipated in Lao Tzu's *Tao Te Ching*, where much of the text describes meditative awareness, sometimes quite directly, as in: "Inhabit the furthest peripheries of emptiness / and abide in the tranquil center" or "sitting still in Way's company." And indeed, the Taoist cosmological dimensions of this "seeing original-nature" awakening are reflected in the graph for

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* Spirit-Lightning Gather was Prajna-Able's dharma-heir and the person most responsible for creating the image of Prajna-Able as the seminal Sixth Patriarch. Hence, in terms of the development of Ch'an thought, it appears Spirit-Lightning Gather himself articulated many of the seminal ideas attributed to Prajna-Able.

Ch'an itself: 禪. As we have seen, 禪 depicts in its left element (礻: 示 in its full form) those cosmological sources of *ch'i* radiating down as a sacred altar-space. The right-hand half of 禪 is 單, an element meaning "individual" or "alone," a sense complemented by older meanings like "simple, great, entirely, exhaustively." Together, these elements describe the fundamental experience of Ch'an meditation: "alone simply and exhaustively *with* the Cosmos." With deeper meditation, this becomes "alone simply and exhaustively *as* the Cosmos," and finally: "the Cosmos alone simply and exhaustively with itself."

氣息

Breath

Meditation is the heart of ch'an practice, and meditation begins with the breath: sitting with the breath, attending to the breath. Breath helps settle thought and quiet mind. But in Ch'an, breath is much more. Life in, life out: breath reveals the entire conceptual framework that shapes Ch'an. Each breath arises from nothing and vanishes back into nothing, the essential movement of Tao: inhale and exhale, sound and silence, full and empty, life and death. Breath moves always at that generative origin-moment/place. And so, attending to breath, like attending to thought, reveals how utterly we belong to that cosmological/ontological process of Tao.

The two ideograms of this chapter's title both mean "breath," each in a quite different way, though they are often combined for richer expressiveness. In an early form, the top element of 息 (自) looked like 𠂤 or 𠃌, which appears to render a kind of emergence out of a generative space (generative emergence a reasonable assumption because it is the fundamental structure of things in Taoist thought). And in its ancient oracle-bone form, that emergence appears to come from two side-by-side