

## **Dao Must Flow Freely** **—The De-substantialization of Buddha Nature in Huineng Chan**

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This paper investigates Huineng's de-substantialization of Buddha-nature as presented in the *Platform Sutra*. It explores the distinctiveness of Huineng's stereological teaching, its place within the inner struggle of Chan Buddhist thought, and its deconstructive or de-reifying strategy.

Huineng's deconstructive operation and its target—Shenxiu's doctrine of *linian*—in terms of the *Platform Sutra*, all concern the understanding of Buddha nature. Huineng's famous verse about enlightenment most clearly shows his subversion of Shenxiu's tendency to reify enlightenment and the Buddha nature.

Originally there is no tree of enlightenment,  
Nor is there a stand with a clear mirror.  
From the beginning not a thing exists;  
Where, then, is a grain of dust to cling?<sup>1</sup>

This verse radically cancels the Buddha nature as something entitative or substantial by undermining the dichotomy that Shenxiu's verse maintains between the Buddha nature and the deluded mind in the metaphor of mirror and dust. However, to see more completely Huineng's deconstructive endeavor, we must examine more details of the doctrines of Huineng and Shenxiu.

Shenxiu draws his idea of *linian* (freeing from thoughts) from the text of the *Dacheng Qixin Lun*. In a treatise on the five expedient means of the *Mahayana*, which is believed to be the collection of his teachings, Shenxiu quotes passages directly from the *Dacheng Qixin Lun*. For example, "What is called enlightenment means that the whole of the mind frees from [deluded] thoughts. . . ."<sup>2</sup> The use of the term *linian* (freeing from thoughts) here thus appears to be the starting point of Shenxiu's own interpretation of *linian*. The *Dacheng Qixin Lun* identifies the Buddha nature, or the mind of suchness, with emptiness in an effort of de-substantialization. By emphasizing *yinian xiangying* (one instant of thought corresponds to suchness) or *linian*, and by identifying suchness with the minds of sentient beings, it also suggests a way of existentializing the issue of Buddha nature as the transformation of the ordinary mind. However, that is only suggestion as it stands in the text. It relies on further interpretation. Moreover, despite its identification between the mind of suchness and the mind in *samsara*, it puts too much emphasis on this mind of suchness and its purity.<sup>3</sup> As a result, the idea of *linian* could entail very different understandings.

Shenxiu's interpretation is a quasi-reifying one. It is not utterly reifying, mainly because the general context of his doctrine is soteriological-practical, and he maintains certain nondualistic clarifications, though not always clearly, as some critical historians have tried to reveal.<sup>4</sup> Nevertheless, the criticisms from other Chan Buddhists should not be seen as merely polemic and sectarian. There are obvious doctrinal and practical reasons that call forth the deconstruction of Shenxiu's interpretation. Let us look at how Shenxiu interprets *linian* first:

If the body and the mind are not aroused, one constantly maintains  
the true mind. What is suchness? When the mind does not move,  
that is suchness; when the form is not in motion, that is also suchness.<sup>5</sup>

The whole [or essence] and the function are clearly distinguish-  
able: freeing from thoughts is the whole; seeing, hearing, feeling  
and knowing are the function.<sup>6</sup>

Question: By what means can one achieve Buddhahood?

Answer: One achieves Buddhahood with the whole [or essence] of the pure mind.<sup>7</sup>

Shenxiu's interpretation clearly leaves room for a logocentric hierarchy that privileges pure over impure, motionlessness over motion, the true mind over the ordinary mind, the whole (*ti*) over the function (*yong*), even transcendence over immanence. Although the Buddha nature or the mind of suchness in the *Dacheng Qixin Lun* involves the aspects of pure and impure, true and deluded, *ti* and *yong*, Shenxiu places his notion of *linian* solely on the side of pure, true and *ti*. Thus "freeing from thoughts" not only means freeing from deluded thoughts but also from motions and actions, including seeing, hearing, feeling, knowing and thinking. By entering into this "pure" and "quiet" state, Shenxiu and his followers believe that they can attain liberation. What kind of liberation they are searching for? Does not it reflect a sort of Chan escapism?<sup>8</sup> Related to this escapism is inevitably a tendency towards reification, pointing to an enchanted place, a foundation. Although Shenxiu does talk about the identification between *ti* and *yong*, *ti* is like something from which *yong* flows and to which it also returns. This dialectic of *ti* and *yong* looks somewhat analogous to a Hegelian dialectic, insofar as it privileges *ti*.

Such a notion of *linian* becomes the target of Huineng's deconstructive operation. It is true that Huineng's idea of *wunian* (no-thought or no-thinking) also comes from the *Dacheng Qixin Lun* in which two terms, *linian* and *wunian*, are almost synonyms. However, if we look at Huineng's creative interpretation of *wunian*, we must admit the great difference between Shenxiu's *linian* and Huineng's *wunian*. To subvert Shenxiu's *linian*, Huineng does not simply fall back on the opposite of Shenxiu's abandonment of all thoughts, such as an emphasis on the importance of thoughts. Rather, Huineng proposes something of neither Shenxiu's nor of its opposite. Huineng's endeavor is a typical deconstructive one. He interprets *wunian* as follows.

No-thought means not to be carried away by thought in the process of thought.<sup>9</sup> . . . Successive thoughts do not stop; prior thoughts, present thoughts, and future thoughts follow one after the other without cessation. . . . If one instant of thought clings, then successive thoughts cling; this is known as being fettered. If in all things successive thoughts do not cling, then you are unfettered. Therefore, we consider this non-abiding essential.<sup>10</sup> . . . But do not stop thinking about everything and eliminate all thoughts. As soon as thought stops, one dies and is reborn elsewhere.<sup>11</sup>

Huineng does several things to dismantle Shenxiu's misleading ideas. First, as we may note, Huineng appeals to the causal chain of thoughts and things. All thoughts and things are interrelated and one causes another. We all live with this flow of thoughts and things, and no one can stop it. Huineng regards this unceasing flow, this non-abiding, as something of the essential condition for human existence or of human nature (*weiren benxing*).<sup>12</sup>

Both freeing from thoughts (here referring to Shenxiu's idea) and attachment to thoughts (a common illness addressed by Buddhist soteriological discourses) are, for Huineng, two extremities that run counter to this essential condition or nature. For this reason, they are the hindrance to the way of liberation. Huineng's solution to this problem is to maintain the Middle Way; though a difficult way, the advice is not to stop something that you will never be able to stop but to detach yourself from it. This is none other than *flowing together* with thoughts and things. To some extent, to practice this (as a soteriological expedient) is to return to your own nature.

Next, in relation to this advice, Huineng proposes his thesis that *dao* must flow or circulate freely (*dao xu tongliu*).<sup>13</sup> He asks: "Why should *dao* be impeded instead?<sup>14</sup> If the mind does not abide in things, the *dao* circulates [or flows] freely; if the mind abides in things, it becomes entangled."<sup>15</sup> He also names this mind of *dao* the "straightforward mind (*zhixin*)" and teaches his disciples "only practicing straightforward mind, and in all things having no attachments whatsoever."<sup>16</sup> In other words, they should "practice the straightforward mind at all times, whether walking, standing, sitting, or reclining."<sup>17</sup> These statements, tinged with Daoist spirit, make it clear that for Huineng, enlightenment or the realization of the Buddha nature is not to impede the living flux of the everyday world. Enlightenment or *dao* is rather the

unimpeded or straightforward flowing together with thoughts and things in all everyday circumstances. Huineng's deconstructive operation upon Shenxiu's idea apparently serves this soteriological motif. It is from this perspective of free flowing together with all thoughts and things that Huineng strongly opposes Shenxiu's way of "contemplating the mind and contemplating purity, not moving and not activating the mind."<sup>18</sup> Huineng's thesis foreshadows the Hongzhou notion of *renyun* (following along with the movement of all things or circumstances), a thesis central to mainstream Chan, though not always properly understood.

The consequence of Huineng's interpretation of *wunian* is significant. For instance, the affirmation of the causal chain and unimpeded flux of thoughts and things provides the legitimacy for the emphasis on the existential awakening of the human mind. According to Huineng, the imagined cessation of this causal chain and flux leads nowhere but to continuous sufferings. Only by practicing non-attachment within this chain or flux of thoughts and things can we hope to attain liberation.<sup>19</sup> For it is this chain or flux that also makes possible the transformation or awakening of the human mind or thought from delusion to enlightenment. The reason is obvious: this flux (or the change of all individual thoughts or objects) brings about passion, craving, impermanence, disillusionment, as well as enlightenment. Although one instance of suffering does not necessarily entail enlightenment, how could there be enlightenment without the affliction resulting from passion? They are not only interrelated but also mutually involved. Therefore, Huineng stresses: "[T]he very passions are themselves enlightenment (*ji fannaoshi puti*)."<sup>20</sup> On the other hand, since the existence of a person is the flow of thoughts and feelings, the existential difference of the mind and thought is always possible. In this sense Huineng underscores: "[U]nawakened, even a Buddha is a sentient being," and "even a sentient being, if he is awakened in an instant of thought, is a Buddha."<sup>21</sup> In other words, "[E]ven these sentient beings, filled with passions and troubles," are able to "gain enlightenment" through the change of one instant of thought.<sup>22</sup> This accent on the existential transformation of the human mind and thought has, without doubt, the consequence of excluding any substance, essence or foundation outside the function of the human mind. Nor does it tend to reify the human mind or subjectivity itself, since the goal of this transformation is to flow together with all things through an empty mind, the mind devoid of self-attachment. Thus Huineng's teaching develops the existentializing point of the *Dacheng Qixin Lun* concerning the realization of the Buddha nature, without relying too much on a "true mind" distinguishable from the mind of the sentient being.

It is also in this context that Huineng's use of the term *zixing* (self nature) should be correctly understood. Throughout the *Platform Sutra*, Huineng seldom uses the term "Buddha nature." He substitutes "self nature" for "Buddha nature." At first sight, this use is no different from those in the previous texts of *tathagatagarbha* thought, since these texts refer to the *tathagatagarbha* as the mind of self nature and purity as well. It is true that there are linguistic and phrasal links between the *Platform Sutra* and those texts of *tathagatagarbha* thought, especially the *Dacheng Qixin Lun*. However, upon closer inspection, Huineng's use of "self nature" is actually unique. This use tends to emphasize more plainly the possibility of existential awakening *within* the living body and mind of every sentient being. It underlines that every human being can actualize this possibility through the practice of non-attachment in all everyday circumstances. As we have indicated, it does not stress the need to establish a Buddha nature or true mind clearly distinguishable from the living mind of every sentient being, namely, the mind in *samsara*. Attaining Buddhahood is but the existential transformation of the same mind of the human being in everyday life. This point is made much clearer than in the *Dacheng Qixin Lun*. The meaning of this term, therefore, is soteriological, functional, and non-substantialist.

It is clearly non-substantialist, since "self nature" here does not mean something existent in and by itself, or self-identity. There is no such meaning involved in the use of this term at all. Rather, Huineng points out: "Human nature is empty (*shiren xingkong*)."<sup>23</sup> Here empty is used, first of all, in the same sense as the *Prajnaparamita* and Madhyamika would maintain, namely, devoid of self existence or self nature. Secondly, it is used in the Post-Madhyamika sense as the Yogacara school and some *tathagatagarbha* texts would maintain, namely, that emptiness, or being devoid of self existence, is the nature of all things. This understanding of the empty nature of all things, in its best form, is maintained as something like the

condition of the possibilities of all things. It is not an origin or essence of all things but nonetheless involves everything. Everything becomes possible because of this emptiness, this web of relativity. Huineng's saying that the self nature involves the ten thousand things should be understood in terms of this meaning.<sup>24</sup> It is clear that this view involves an objective or cognitive element, insofar as it describes the condition of the possibilities of all things. We may call it quasi-transcendental or ontologically neutral, since it can be led to a reified view by substantializing this condition or to a de-substantialized view by stressing its pragmatic function as expedient. However, when Huineng states that emptiness is human nature or human nature is empty, he does not end with this second usage but gives the term new meanings. His use of the term involves the meanings of relationality, the existential changeability of personhood, and the accomplishment of action.

To make this point clearer, I must clarify the linguistic-cultural background of Huineng's use of the term *xing* (nature) or *renxing* (human nature) in relation to the term *zixing*. Scholars have commonly accepted that the Confucian, especially Mencian, emphasis on the innate goodness of human nature had great impact on the Chinese Buddhist acceptance of *tathagatagarbha* thought. However, scholars have recently revealed that the notion of human nature in Chinese philosophy is different from the Western notion of human nature as a changeless essence contained in all individual human beings. For instance, Tang Junyi, in his extensive study on *renxing*, explicates the classical Confucian conception of *xing* as concerned primarily with the existential changeability and growth of each living human being. The *xing* is discussed from a practical and dynamic perspective. The meaning of *xing* involves directionality, relationality and existential-practical development.<sup>25</sup> In the Mencian theory of mind-nature, the *xing* is explained in terms of the growth of each individual mind. "It should not be termed an essence or principle deeply rooted in the mind."<sup>26</sup> In a similar vein, Roger Ames radically questions the adequacy of the translation of the Chinese term *renxing* as "human nature" in its Western sense.<sup>27</sup> Ames clarifies the Chinese meaning of *xing* as "a creative act."<sup>28</sup> "[X]ing denotes the entire process of being a person. . . . [A] person is not a sort of *being*, but first and foremost a *doing* and *making* . . . [X]ing is not reducible to what is innate or a priori."<sup>29</sup> These expositions have, to some extent, clarified the linguistic-cultural background of Huineng's use of *xing* as well. Let us now look at one example of Huineng's use of *xing* in the *Platform Sutra*:

. . . immediately awakened. It is like the great sea which gathers all the flowing streams, and harmonizes the small waters with the large waters as a whole. This is realizing your own nature. [Such a person] does not abide either inside or outside; he is free to come or go. Readily he casts aside the mind that clings [to things], and there is no obstruction to his passage.<sup>30</sup>

Realizing one's own nature here is not explained with what one recognizes but how one acts, how one achieves the existential transformation of the mind, and how one practices the free flowing together (or being harmonized) with all things. The focus is not on the cognitive element contained in the second usage, but on the existential function of the mind and pragmatic wisdom (*zhi*), on the practical-behavioral carrying out of non-attachment. The usage of *xing* here is plainly operational. We have no difficulty in detecting the underlying accord of Huineng's usage with the Confucian one, despite its Buddhist context. The understanding of this unique usage is crucial to the avoidance of any accusation that Huineng's "self nature" is a substantialist view. The usage is also a good example in showing the Chinese transformation of the original Buddhist usage.

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<sup>1</sup> Heinrich Dumoulin, *Zen Buddhism: A History*, trans. James W. Heisig and Paul Knitter (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1988), vol. 1, 133. I have made a minor change. I am aware that contemporary historians of Chan Buddhism have questioned the authenticity of the *Platform Sutra* as the collection of Huineng's teaching in general and these verses historically attributed to Huineng and Shenxiu in particular. My use of these materials from the *Platform Sutra* does not mean that I want to ignore or completely reject those critical studies by historians. My relatively uncritical approach to the text is based on the reason that the thoughts attributed to Huineng and Shenxiu in this text and others still reflect the

strategies employed in the history of Chan discourse that are religiously- philosophically significant and need to be studied. In other words, they are extremely useful materials for our examination of deconstructive and reifying tendencies in Chan. These materials can serve the purpose of this study well, helping providing a coherent interpretation of different Chan strategies, no matter whom we could identify as the real thinker behind them. The significance of this text in collecting crucial Chan thought and its role in the evolution of Chan thought cannot be reduced for its suspicious authorship and for some historical inaccuracy of its narrative. I therefore focus basically on the analysis of these thoughts themselves and the related Chan linguistic strategies demonstrated in the text, shedding new light on the understanding of these inner struggles while utilizing the traditional divisions and distinctions.

<sup>2</sup> *Dacheng Wusheng Fangbian Men*. See *Taisho shinshu daizokyo* (hereafter *Taisho*), vol. 85, 1273. For the original words of the *Dacheng Qixin Lun*, see *Taisho*, vol. 32, 576; cf. Yoshito S. Hakeda (trans.), *The Awakening of Faith* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1967), 37. Scholars may notice that I translate the Chinese word *xinti* as “the whole of the mind” and avoid translating it simply as the substance or essence of the mind. To my knowledge, the Chinese word *ti* originally involves the meaning of body and the organic whole. It may be even distinguished from the English word subjectivity which involves the meaning of substance in modern Western philosophy. However, the *ti* in Chinese philosophy nonetheless reflects the relatively static dimension of the whole and is distinguished from the dynamic dimension of the *yong*, the functioning, even though the two are often considered non-dualistic. This makes a privilege of the static *ti* possible and the deconstruction of it necessary. In the *Dacheng Qixin Lun*, although the use of the *ti* and *yong* is mixed with another term *xiang* and does not indicate a mature Chinese usage, it has been broadly admitted that the text is influenced by Chinese thought. My rendering of the *xinti* as the whole of the mind is thus to take into consideration the historical-cultural background of the text and of the ensuing Chan adoption. It avoids the ignorance of the difference between the Western metaphysical appropriation and the one we are now examining. For Shenxiu’s quotation and the relation of his treatise with the *Dacheng Qixin Lun*, see John R. McRae, *The Northern School and the Formation of Early Ch’an Buddhism* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1986), 175, 221-223. Also see Bernard Faure, *The Will to Orthodoxy: A Critical Genealogy of Northern Chan Buddhism* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997), 41-45.

<sup>3</sup> In this regard, we agree with Gadjin Nagao’s position. In his “What remains in *Sunyata*,” Nagao points out, the *Dacheng Qixin Lun* “seems to put more emphasis on ‘the mind of suchness’ . . .” See Gadjin M. Nagao, *Madhyamika and Yogacara*, trans. Leslie S. Kawamura (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1991), 60.

<sup>4</sup> See McRae, 213, 225; Faure, 43-44.

<sup>5</sup> *Taisho*, vol. 85, 1273. For the English translation see Faure, 43. I have made minor changes. Also see McRae, 174.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 1274. Cf. McRae, 178.

<sup>7</sup> Yinshun, *Zhongguo Chanzong Shi* (Taipei: Zhengwen Chubanshe, 1971), 141. For the English translation, cf. *ibid.*, 195.

<sup>8</sup> Yanagida Seizan has called this a sort of “Chan sickness,” a word taken from the early Chan writings. See Yanagida Seizan, *Shoki no zenshi 2: Rekidai hobo ki* (Tokyo: Chikuma shobo, 1976), 12.

<sup>9</sup> I take this sentence basically from Wing-tsit Chan’s translation. See *The Platform Scripture* (New York: St. John’s University Press, 1963), 51.

<sup>10</sup> *The Platform Sutra of the Sixth Patriarch*, trans. Philip B. Yampolsky (New York: Columbia University Press, 1967), 138. I have made minor changes.

<sup>11</sup> These two sentences are taken again from Wing-tsit Chan’s translation. See Chan, 51.

<sup>12</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, 50.

<sup>13</sup> Yampolsky, 136; Chan, 46.

<sup>14</sup> Here I follow Wing-tsit Chan’s translation. Chan, 49.

<sup>15</sup> Yampolsky, 136. I have made a minor change.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>17</sup> Chan, 47.

<sup>18</sup> Cf. Yampolsky, 137.

- <sup>19</sup> “If in successive thoughts you practice it, this is called true existence.” Ibid., 148.  
<sup>20</sup> Ibid.  
<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 151.  
<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 150.  
<sup>23</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, 146; Chan, 68.  
<sup>24</sup> Cf. *ibid.*  
<sup>25</sup> Tang Junyi, *Zhongguo Zhexue Yuanlun: Yuanxing Pian* (Taipei: Xuesheng Shuju, 1984), 3-11.  
<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 29.  
<sup>27</sup> Roger T. Ames, “The Mencian Conception of *Ren xing*: Does it Mean ‘Human Nature’?” in Henry Rosemont (ed.), *Chinese Texts and Philosophical Contexts* (La Salle: Open Court, 1991), 145.  
<sup>28</sup> Ibid.  
<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 149-150.  
<sup>30</sup> Yampolsky, 150. I have made some changes.