

## Sutra as Power Play

By William Eaton

Review of:

- *The Platform Sutra of the Sixth Patriarch: The Text of the Tun-Huang Manuscript*, translated by Philip B. Yampolsky (Columbia University Press, 2012)
- *Readings of the Platform Sutra*, edited by Morten Schlütter and Stephen F. Teiser (Columbia University Press, 2012)

*William Eaton writes on ethics and the limits of human understanding, and is the Editorial Adviser to Zeteo.*

As a result of the *Platform Sutra*, Huineng, the Sixth Patriarch (638-713 CE), has come to be regarded as one of the founders of the school of Chinese Chan Buddhism, which later further developed into Zen in Japan and Seon in Korea. Notwithstanding that Huineng did not write the text and seems to have been a minor figure, and notwithstanding that this religious school and indeed the sutra itself stand in some opposition to the use of texts as part of religious practice or of a wise life, the eighth-century *Platform Sutra* has enjoyed centuries of popularity and has served as a foundational text. It is best known for its equation of meditation and wisdom (“they are a unity, not two things”), and for its championing of “formless precepts” and of the “Sudden School” of Buddhism, which teaches that enlightenment may come in a flash, rather than requiring some course of structured study, religious practice and community service over time.

The text mixes a fictional autobiography with equally fictional sermons, interviews with students and deathbed instructions. The present review will ask whether the central message of all this is indeed a religious or philosophical one; however, for hundreds of years the sutra has been read as if it were. As in the Foreword to the translation Morten Schlütter

summarizes the received message: Buddha nature “is the original true condition of all sentient beings, right here for clear-eyed monastics and laypeople to experience [or rediscover?] for themselves.” I am tempted to call this a no frills or people’s version of Buddhism: no big statues or temples, no high priests, long courses of study or time-consuming community service, no social status or political connections, and, in theory at least, no texts.

This review for an interdisciplinary journal will not cover the full range of subjects to be found in these two rich, Columbia Press volumes, one a carefully annotated translation of the oldest extant version of the sutra, along with background information and analysis, and the other a collection of scholarly articles offering engaging discussion of the sutra’s contents and its political, religious and philosophical contexts. The review will offer: some of the background on the sutra; call attention to the class-warfare aspect of the text and to a few of the many connections between its contents and Western traditions; come back to this matter of meditation equalling wisdom; say a few words about the fundamental absurdity of the Columbia Press undertaking (which is *not* to say its lack of validity or sustenance), and close with a thought on all of our mythmaking (of which this review, too, must play its small part).

## **Background**

The translation volume is a reissue of Philip Yampolsky’s translation and study of this text previously published in 1967. This is a translation of the version of the sutra that in the early twentieth century was found, along with tens of thousands of other manuscripts, in a sealed cave near the oasis town of Dunhuang, along the Silk Road in northwestern China. Prior to this astounding discovery, the *Platform Sutra* that had long been popular and influential was that of a quite different, thirteenth-century version. Now add to this the fact that the text is apparently a composite of work by members of the next generation or two of Buddhist priests. These priests may in the end have been less committed to the particular beliefs set forth in the sutra than they were eager to develop dogmatic differences, hagiography and so forth in order to establish a sect and a line of leaders that led to themselves from the Buddha and through the celebrated meditation master and bringer of Buddhism to China, Boddhidharma. Moreover, as both of these Columbia volumes do an excellent and engaging job of explaining, these priests were responding to a particular political context. For example, the *Platform Sutra* was written after the fall from power of the Empress Wu, the

only woman in the history of China to assume the title of Empress Regnant, the de facto and then titular ruler of China from 665 to 705 CE. The Empress had promoted Buddhism (in some opposition to Confucianism) as a way of consolidating her power. As part of this initiative she supported a court-centered, scholastic religious hierarchy and the building of monumental religious buildings and statues. In his *Readings* article on “The Figure of Huineng,” John Jorgensen points out how the *Platform Sutra* may be read as part of a “masculine backlash, consciously reviving Confucian patriarchal ideology”. (E.g., from the sutra itself: “Building temples, giving alms, and making offerings are merely the practice of seeking after blessings. One cannot make merit with blessings.”)

Readers of these Columbia Press volumes may have a feeling of the words of the *Platform Sutra* turning to dust in their fingers. Once we realize that the text is fiction, how are we to read the opening line: “The Master Huineng ascended the high seat at the lecture hall of the Ta-fan Temple and expounded the Dharma of the Great Perfection of Wisdom, and transmitted the precepts of formlessness.” Or how to read lines like, “The Sixth Patriarch said: ‘Hear me as I explain to you’”? And should this older, Dunhuang version be considered the truer or more foundational one since it is the older fiction, and notwithstanding all the religious traditions that were built, over centuries, without it? And is the real subject here religious truth, how to live or achieve nirvana, or is it how such concerns are used by ambitious people jockeying for power, either within explicitly religious structures or in the larger society? One may quickly find oneself thinking of the Pontius Pilate, the apostle Paul, Augustine, Thomas Becket, and the role of politics and personal ambition in the evolution of Christianity. We are here touching, too, on one of the other great strengths of these Columbia volumes: how they (implicitly) encourage us draw comparisons with other religious and philosophical texts and traditions and to think about the role and process of mythmaking. (It was not for nothing that Yampolsky was the grandson of the celebrated anthropologist Franz Boas, nor that Schlütter’s field is the history of Chan Buddhism and the relation between Buddhism and secular society in imperial China.)

The key figure in the development of the *Platform Sutra* is Shenhui (684-758), an ambitious Chan Buddhist who was a disciple of Huineng’s but does not seem to have ever met him. In promoting the idea of a patriarchy headed by a single leader who passed his robe and his teachings to his chosen successor, Shenhui’s particular idea was to establish that he himself was the next, the Seventh Patriarch. He was also eager to differentiate a right

“southern” (China) school of Buddhism from a bad northern one, and for all this latter school was in large part a creation or exaggeration of Shenhui and his colleagues. In these effort Shenhui is thought to have contributed the biography of Huineng which opens the *Platform Sutra*. While the details offered there apparently have nothing to do with the historical Huineng’s life, they are quite like the life ascribed to Confucius. Or, more generally, and as Jorgensen outlines, what the biographical segment offers is “common stereotypes.”

Thus Huineng becomes the son of an official from Fanyang (near modernday Beijing) who (shades of the Cultural Revolution) was reduced to commoner status and exiled to the far southern frontier, a land of malaria, wild tribes and desperation. The father quickly dies and Huineng grows up in extreme poverty, living with his old mother, selling firewood to stay alive. In opposition to Confucian, family-oriented teaching, Huineng leaves his mother and makes the long, courageous journey to the north (seeking to reclaim his ancestral status as a high government official, we might say). When he arrives at the monastery of the ostensible Fifth Patriarch, Hung-jen, the latter says, If you are from a southern town then you are “*Ko-lao*” (or *gelao*). Yampolsky explains that this a standard insult, a slur, by which northern Chinese accused southerners of being barbarians, or practically wild animals. Jorgensen explains that *gelao* may have been thought cannibals, and they certainly hunted and ate meat: both non-Buddhist practices.

“I replied,” our fictional Huineng writes, “although people from the south and people from the north differ, there is no north and south in Buddha nature. Although my barbarian’s body and your body are not the same, what difference is there in our Buddha nature?”

The Master, Hung-jen, sends Huineng to tread the pestle in the threshing room of the monastery.

After Huineng has been working in the threshing room for several months, and, it would seem, receiving no formal education, the Fifth Patriarch announces that those of his disciples who wish to inherit the robe and the Dharma (the teachings, the understanding of the nature of things) should write a verse. The person who thereby reveals himself to be truly awakened will win the competition. In the story the presumptive heir to the robe is the head monk, Shenzui, who in real life was one of the great Buddhist leaders during the

Empress Wu's reign, and thus someone Shenhui and his colleagues wished to elbow aside.

One midnight the *Platform Sutra's* Shenhui writes on a corridor wall

The body is the Bodhi tree [the source of enlightenment]  
The mind is like a clear mirror.  
At all times we must strive to polish it,  
And must not let the dust collect.

This is a vision of our essence as pure, but easily corruptible by external influences. To try to maintain our purity we must act in a disciplined way, following Buddhist precepts—e.g. not killing, not stealing, not engaging in improper sexual relations, not being angry or holding wrong views.

In the *Platform Sutra* Chan Buddhism is defined negatively, as rejecting this or that view or practice attributed to other schools. Thus, for example, in opposition to this idea of following Buddhist precepts, it offers *wuxiang*. In one of the articles in the *Readings* volume, Paul Groner states, “*wuxiang* literally means ‘without marks’ or lacking any determinate characteristics. Applied to the precepts, the word refers to rules or prohibitions whose content is not specified.” (Empty rules?) From one perspective, this could mean that the person who has rediscovered his Buddha nature, his essential purity, would follow the precepts (do the right thing?) without thinking. From the no-frills Buddhism perspective, *wuxiang* could be taken to mean that rules don't matter, even the championing of meditation cannot matter, nothing determinate can matter.

We return, in any case, to the story of the competition for the Fifth Patriarch's robe and status. As he was illiterate, “Huineng” reports, he had to ask someone to read the head monk's verse to him and someone to write his reply, which took the prize:

Bodhi originally has no tree,  
The mirror also has no stand. [i.e., *wuxiang*]  
Buddha nature is always clean and pure;  
Where is there room for dust?

This is a vision of purity as entirely self-contained and existing independently either of external influences or of discipline or rule-following. (I think of the strain of radical individualism in American culture, according to which government and educational institutions, and human society with its rules and influences, are not only corrupting forces but unnecessary.)

## Class warfare

Although this point is not discussed in the Columbia volumes, both the fictional biography and Huineng's teachings are, like the Gospels, engaging in what conservatives in the United States scorn as "class warfare". Or should we think of such teachings as offering solace to the lower classes, solace which is supposed to take the place of wealth, power or aspirations to them? ("Again I say to you, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle, than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God.") We might also compare this aspect of the *Platform Sutra* to a point that Emerson and many, many Americans have made in defining themselves in opposition to the more overtly stratified Western European way: you don't have to be well-born, rich or powerful to become wise or attain enlightenment, and, again, in fact possessions and social status may stand in the way of realizing one's inherent purity or goodness. The "sudden," anti-intellectual, formless approach saves an aspirant to enlightenment or to the profession of priest, Master included, from the time-consuming and costly process of getting an education, let alone of following rules, doing good works or community service. Similarly Bodhidharma and his followers rejected the significance of sin and merit or of monastic training and discipline.

Books cannot be all things to all men and women; however, it is unfortunate and all-too-standard for American scholarship in the post-McCarthy period that no space has been made in these two books for a discussion of the class issues. In the sutra itself there is a scene (considered a precursor to later Zen practices) in which Huineng (perhaps with a cane) hits a student, who happens to be Shenhui, three times. "Your mind is deluded and you cannot see, so you go and ask a teacher to show you the way. You must awaken with your own mind and see for yourself." This is certainly a religious teaching, but it also has social implications. I would argue for, and propose for exploration, the nearness of this teaching to various egalitarian claims such as that you should not need a license or special training to cut hair or fix people's pipes, that you don't need an M.D. or a Ph.D. to provide psychological counselling, or indeed that, if you listen closely to your body, you can figure out what combination of foods, vitamin pills and supplements are best for your health. (It is not for nothing that my first scholarly interest was in the establishment of the professions in the nineteenth-century United States and of the role of bits of scientific dogma and of prescribed courses of academic study in this process.)

### **Meditation and wisdom are a unity**

I have been tempted to skip any discussion of the central theme of the *Platform Sutra* on the grounds that: it has been written about at length, and, as I shall later discuss, any discussion of this point involves not recognizing its validity and making it more difficult for the reader to embrace the message. Or, as the Sixth Patriarch says, echoing lines of other Buddhist texts, we engage in such discussions “only because of the dullness of people in the world.” They are not for people of promise or of great capacity. (I.e., not for people who might actually be enlightened by the teaching?)

Nonetheless, I will note briefly here that the equation of meditation (*dhyana* in Sanskrit, which engendered *channa* and then *chan* in Chinese) and wisdom (*prajna*) may be read in various ways. On a simple level, Huineng proposes that meditation is “the substance of wisdom” and wisdom “the function of meditation”. If one seeks to view or understand our Buddha nature (e.g., by reading *The Platform Sutra*) then “True Reality” is obscured, a false duality of subject and object is created. (As Schlütter puts it, the *Platform Sutra* is “a teaching that requires an uncompromising nondualism because, paradoxically, to seek the buddha nature is to separate oneself from it.”) If one is not or is no longer subject to such delusions, however, “then the original nature reveals its purity.” Meditation is the tool (or lamp, in one of the sutra’s analogies)—the way to “separate from views,” to “not activate thoughts,” and thus bathe in the light of wisdom. Having some fun, we might imagine in this, our computer age that if meditation produces wisdom and wisdom promotes meditation as being productive of wisdom, an endless loop could get created and lead to something like the blank “blue screen of death,” as we call it. Except that, thanks to this sutra, we might suddenly recognize this screen not as failure, obstacle, time-consumer, but as sky and escape, as an opportunity not to do the menial office work and compulsive corresponding which our computers and paymasters demand of us.

In his discussion of Huineng’s text, Yampolsky quotes from accounts of the (non-fictional) teachings of Shenhui. “[T]wo priests of great virtue teach men to ‘concentrate the mind to enter the *dhyana*, to settle the mind to see purity, . . .’” But Shenhui said, “If I taught people to do these things it would be a hindrance to attaining enlightenment. The sitting I’m talking about means not giving rise to thoughts. The meditation I’m talking about is to see the original nature.” “Not to give rise to thoughts, emptiness without being, this is the true meditation. The ability to see the non-rising of thoughts, to see emptiness without being, this is the true wisdom.” We touch here on one of the sources of Zen Buddhism’s appeal to we

Westerners: an idea that Zen embodies a higher level of wisdom—and thus the possibility of less human suffering, less anxiety—than we have been experiencing for so many millennia with our subject-object approach.

### **The absurdity and our mythmaking**

Of course if the mind is in and of itself pure, and meditation (which is not contemplation) is wisdom, anything else, and certainly to include texts presenting biographical details and championing ways of thinking, are *at best* irrelevant. And to build a whole scholarly apparatus on top of all this—to make claims about truer texts and more accurate readings or translations, and about political and class contexts, or even about what the real message is about—some *what?* that should be learned— All of this is confusion and distraction. As our fictional Sixth Patriarch tells a student who has been reciting a sutra for seven years and has gotten nowhere, “You are very proficient in the Dharma but your mind is not proficient. . . . I have never in my life known written words, . . . The mind has nothing to do with thinking, because its fundamental source is empty. . . . Do not cultivate the ‘wisdom’ of sentient beings.”

Not unlike the Pyrrhonian skeptics of the first to fourth centuries (CE) in the West, the Sixth Patriarch proposes that his way will bring tranquility, escape from the anxieties of mortal existence, we might say. “If you are only peacefully calm and quiet, without motion, without stillness, without birth, without destruction, without coming, without going, without judgments of right and wrong, without staying and without going—then this is the Great Way.”

We may assume that the contributors to the Columbia volumes under review were not lost to the absurdity being called attention to here. I take their commitment to scholarly study of these texts to be signs that they, like me, are of another, non Chan or Zen faith. Writers and intellectuals, scholars included, are hardly immune to the anxieties of mortal existence, nor to the political infighting of our life as social animals, but we find our greatest feelings of relief in quite another practice than meditation. For us the Great Way is study, in making myriad judgments of right and wrong, in carefully crafting and recrafting our written words.

I would here also touch on an aspect of mythmaking and of the evolution of dogma that Yampolsky and his successors call attention to. There is a little comment on page 18 of

Yampolsky's introduction, a little comment that opens a door on our whole mythical world, the stories we tell ourselves (to include about Jesus, or about Plato for that matter): "The biography of Huineng typifies the problems of Chan historiography: the later the work, the more detailed the information provided." This comment brought my mind back to the bit of reading I have done in the biographies of Greek philosophers and writers, and then from there to Paul's elaborations of Christ's teachings, to the appearance several centuries after the death of the Buddha of a host of new/old sutras, and from there to the work of Yampolsky and his predecessors and successors. One of the most powerful forces in human religion and in our mythmaking more generally is this accretion of detail, of stories. We can see this also in the elaboration of modern science. I am reminded of the verse that Huineng bested. We might say that, like the head monk's vision of the mind as a dust-attracting mirror, so human insight has a tendency to attract dust, or I have thought of it at times like scaffolding, which rests on the sidewalk at a few points and builds up from there, distracting the eye from what might be considered essential: these points where the structure of our scaffolding touches, though is not anchored to something more solid. Similarly and more famously, the philosopher Willard van Orman Quine compared the "totality of our so-called knowledge or beliefs" to "a man-made fabric which impinges on experience only along the edges". From this perspective, the *Platform Sutra's* insight into nondualism might be thought of as one of these edges or touches, and all the teaching and writing that has come after is like so much scaffolding or weaving.

It could be said that an argument of the *Platform Sutra* is that the best way of escaping from the anxieties of human existence is to—suddenly, as it were—find one's way back to one of these rare points of connection, or to a one, most important point of connection: emptiness (non-connection? or is it the emptiness of tautologizing: meditation=wisdom?). But clearly there are those of us, a much larger group or personality type, who have found our relief in getting lost in the scaffolding and connections, and in doing some building and (subject-object) connecting of our own.

*The End.*