



## SUDDEN VS GRADUAL ENLIGHTENMENT

**HOW ZEN BECAME ZEN: The Dispute Over Enlightenment and the Formation of Chan Buddhism in Song-Dynasty China**  
By Morten Schlütter

Reviewed by Joan Sutherland

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These days, some of the most exciting and illuminating writing about Zen comes from scholars, who are often also practitioners. We've reached the point where any discussion of Zen that doesn't take into account new findings about its literary and cultural history looks like quaint mythologizing, instead of something that can be refined through new research and deepening insight.

We can now add to this growing body of helpful work Morten Schlütter's *How Zen Became Zen*, which if it doesn't quite live up to its title, admirably fulfills its subtitle, *The Dispute Over Enlightenment and the Formation of Chan Buddhism in Song-Dynasty China*. In the traditional narrative, the Tang

dynasty saw the greatest flourishing of Chan (pronounced *Zen* in Japanese), and the following Song dynasty was a time of institutionalization and decline. Schlütter makes clear, however, that it was in the Song, during the eleventh and twelfth centuries, that some of the things we most take for granted about Chan and Zen crystallized, and he highlights a dispute over the fundamental question—What is practice for?—that persists to the present day.

In a nutshell, Schlütter proposes that in the first part of the Song dynasty, the Linji (Rinzai) school had become dominant, but there was little sense of sectarianism within Chan. Most practice was monastic, and most of it involved the study of *gongans* (koans). The later Song saw the development of the Caodong (Soto) school, which advocated a form of meditation called silent illumination.

Schlütter describes this as “meditation whose object was to achieve a mental quietude that allowed the already perfect Buddha-nature that everyone inherently possesses to naturally manifest itself.” Silent illumination de-emphasized enlightenment as a breakthrough event, instead stressing stillness and the absence of thought; seated meditation was called “facing the wall.” Schlütter makes it clear that while silent illumination had antecedents, it was the creation of a group of Song dynasty teachers that included silent illumination's most famous Chan proponent, Hongzhi Zhengjue.

According to Schlütter, this is the moment when the tensions between gradual and sudden enlightenment, cultivation and breakthrough, Soto and Rinzai, that have so characterized Zen discourse fully emerged. In response to

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the new formulation of practice represented by silent illumination, the great innovator of the Linji school, Dahui Zonggao, reinvented koan practice. His fundamental conviction was that the point of practice is a transformation of consciousness through a particular event in time and space called enlightenment. Dahui's method, the *kanhua* approach to koan study, has proved so fruitful that it is still used today. *Kanhua* literally means "observing the word." In addition to taking up whole koans for study, Dahui advocated focusing on the *huatou*, the salient part of the koan, which is brought directly into meditation. For example, here is the famous encounter story often used as a first koan:

A monk asked Zhaozhou, "Does a dog have buddhanature or not?"  
Zhaozhou replied, "No!"

The *huatou* in this koan is the No—*Wu* in Chinese, *Mu* in Japanese—which is repeated silently on every exhale during meditation. The practitioner also focuses on No throughout the day: "Whether you are walking or standing, sitting or lying down, you must not for a moment cease. When deluded thoughts arise, you must also not suppress them with your mind. Only just hold up this *huatou*," Dahui instructed. Schlütter believes that Dahui didn't simply invent a new meditation technique, but actually created a whole new kind of Chan.

Dahui is equally well known for his critiques of what he considered misguided practices, including silent illumination. To him, silent illumination was a passive, quietist practice devoid of insight. It made two fundamental errors: attempting to use the mind to control the mind, and conflating inherent enlightenment with the actualization of enlightenment. In other words, if stillness meditation is itself the actualization of enlightenment, there is no need to overcome delusion and realize one's true nature—something the Buddha himself had to do. Dahui called silent illumination being stuck in a ghost cave, and he

originally developed *kanhua* practice so that people who had been fruitlessly practicing stillness meditation could be brought to enlightenment.

For his part, Hongzhi argued on behalf of silent illumination that rejecting still meditation and striving for enlightenment is succumbing to a kind of craving. But he did advocate something other than absolute stillness: practitioners should "alertly destroy murkiness" in their meditation, even as they turn from any thought of achievement. Where Dahui is forceful and direct, Hongzhi is lyrical, and his writing has a vast, dreamy scope. Here is a stanza from a piece he wrote about silent illumination:

*When "silence" and "illumination"  
both are operating and complete,  
the lotus flower opens and the  
dreamer awakens.  
The hundred rivers flow into the sea,  
and the thousand peaks face the  
great mountain.*

It's common for Buddhist innovators to invent a pedigree for their work, and the creators of silent illumination like Hongzhi enlisted two great teachers of the Tang dynasty, Shitou Xiqian and Dongshan Liangjie, as ancestors. Schlütter shows that neither taught any form of silent illumination, and that they are more properly understood as crucial figures in the vibrant mix of Tang dynasty Chan than as Caodong-Soto progenitors.

Schlütter respects the commitment of the teachers he studies: "The intensity of religious conviction, the concern for the well-being of the audience, and the great eloquence and sincerity that come across to us in the preserved writings of both the Caodong and Linji traditions of the twelfth century are still moving after many centuries." At the same time, like most scholars he also considers the social and cultural factors that might be at play when practice traditions are created or reinvented. For example, competition for practitioners and their support probably played a role in this dispute;

Dahui was apparently concerned that silent illumination would be particularly popular with educated laypeople, who were one of Chan's most important constituencies, because the practice provided an escape from busy lives but didn't require frequent meetings with a teacher, as koan practice does.

The book also looks at how Chan matured during the Song dynasty, when it "acquired an institutional base, defined its crucial lineages, and developed its own distinctive literature." Schlütter also presents an engaging discussion of Chan lineages as "transmission families," which shared with all families the age-old concerns of procreation (metaphorically speaking) and inheritance.

Schlütter touches lightly on a few intriguing subplots that it would be fascinating to hear more about. One involves the Sixth Ancestor of Chan Buddhism, Huineng, whose story of going from illiterate rice pounder to inheritor of the ancestral robe and bowl and founder of the Southern School of Chan is essential Zen mythology. As Schlütter lays out the argument, it was Huineng's disciple Shenhui who promoted this story, despite the fact that Huineng was an obscure monk mentioned in only one early source. In that text, Huineng is listed as one of the Fifth Ancestor Hongren's ten disciples, but Hongren says that Huineng would become a master of only local significance. (Shenhui claimed this document was a forgery.) The implication is that Shenhui promoted the Huineng myth in order to back his own claim as the rightful Seventh Ancestor. This bit of revisionist history raises but doesn't resolve a "Who really wrote Shakespeare's plays?" kind of question: if Huineng wasn't the genius responsible for the *Platform Sutra*, who was?

*How Zen Became Zen* is thought-provoking, and it clarifies and deepens our understanding of a lively, influential time in the history of Zen. Where it challenges some of the tradition's narrative about itself, we should welcome the illumination. **BD**