

THE ZEN INSIGHT OF SHEN HUI

by **Thomas Merton**

The discovery of ancient Buddhist manuscripts in the Tunhwang Caves is comparable to the more recent finds made at Qumran in Palestine. The Qumran manuscripts have made a decisive contribution to the study of Judaism and early Christianity. The Tunhwang texts have opened up to the modern scholar a revolutionary period in Chinese culture and religion. More than that, however, they have put into our hands documents which are absolutely necessary for the understanding of Ch'an Buddhism (more familiar by the Japanese name Zen). If Ch'an, which is characteristically "anti-scriptural" and "anti-authoritarian," can be said to have "authoritative documents" in China, the highest importance is to be attributed to those of the eighth century Master, the so-called "Seventh Patriarch," Shen Hui.

The teachings of Shen Hui are not only scholarly but alive with Zen insight. Many scholars think that works attributed to the Sixth Patriarch, Hui Neng, are actually the work of Shen Hui and his disciples. Whether or not this is true, the whole corpus of documents which represent the teaching of the Southern School of Ch'an in the seventh and eighth centuries -- the teachings of Hui Neng, Shen Hui and their followers -- are completely decisive in the development of Chinese Buddhism. It is with these Masters that Ch'an attained its purest and most authentic expression as a perfectly Chinese creation. Later growth brought further refinements and perhaps more paradoxical methods of teaching, but the central insights of Ch'an, and its fantastic wedding of simplicity and depth, sophistication and directness, paradox and clarity, was achieved in the Southern School. It can be said without serious fear of contradiction that Shen Hui possessed all these qualities in a most unusual degree. It was he who gave Ch'an its final and mature shape.

But there is more to Shen Hui than this. Unlike the simple, unlettered peasant, Hui Neng, and unlike so many other Ch'an masters who lived silent and remote in mountain hermitages, Shen Hui was an active and in some ways revolutionary figure in the intellectual and religious world of his time -- which was one of the most civilized and creative in the entire history

of humanity. It is enough to say that he was in close contact with poets like Wang Wei as well as with the religious and political figures who appear dimly to tease him with their enigmatic questions. More than that -- and here we run into a paradox that is not the least of those we find in Ch'an -- he was able to propose an essentially revolutionary teaching within the framework of a religious and political establishment which sought to use him for what one might call counter-revolutionary ends. At first, because his teaching attracted large crowds, Shen Hui was exiled to a distant place -- lest he be tempted to overthrow the imperial government. A revolution did indeed occur, but he was not implicated in it. After its overthrow, in 757, Shen Hui was called back to preach a monastic renewal which was to have interesting consequences for the government: the tax on professional-licenses of monks and nuns was intended to meet the defense budget.

Shen Hui's teaching, on highly official occasions, operates on two levels: that of a popular Buddhism for the masses, and that of Ch'an insight for the advanced. Nor was this a matter of clever policy. Shen Hui maintained that it was an expression of Ch'an itself. His *dhyana* (meditation) and *prajna* (contemplative insight, wisdom) were not only confined to moments of "quiet sitting" in the forest or meditation hall: his preaching itself was both *dhyana* and *prajna* in one. Those who understood would intuitively realize this. Those who did not understand would still be, without realizing it, in contact with the immediate manifestation of what they were obscurely seeking, and might awaken to it in their own way. Evidently the crowds who listened to Shen Hui *believed* this.

The temptation to compare Shen Hui with the Western Gnostics must be avoided here. Buddhism has no room in it for Gnosticism, though the *chio* ("knowledge"), which is identical with the union of *dhyana* and *prajna*, might conceivably be translated "gnosis" (taken in a non-"gnostic" sense). Gnosticism is profoundly dualistic, and there is no dualism in Ch'an. Shen Hui would never have claimed that there was one level of Ch'an for an elite and another for *hoi polloi*. There was one insight for everyone, but not everyone saw it. Perhaps the extraordinary impact upon large crowds of his teaching may have been due to the fact that those who did not *experience* what he said nevertheless believed it.

I am no student of Chinese history, and what I have said so far about Shen Hui as a "revolutionary" I have taken on trust from a modern Chinese scholar, Hu Shih, who also happens to have been one of the leaders in the Chinese literary revolution after World War I. In the famous debate between Hu Shih and the Japanese Zen scholar, Daisetz Suzuki (which

centers on the Ch'an of Shen Hui) one may be inclined to side with Suzuki who has recaptured the authentic spirit of Ch'an insight. Suzuki was speaking from his own experience and not only from his research. But at the same time Hu Shih's essay is full of important information. The reader is charmed and absorbed by the way Hu Shih intuitively identifies himself with the eighth century master and projects his own ideals into the revolutionary situation of a former time.

It might be useful to quote a few lines from him here. They will bring to life if not Shen Hui himself, at least the Shen Hui that Dr. Hu Shih imaged and venerated.

His lifelong popular preaching of a new and simple form of Buddhism based on the idea of sudden enlightenment, his four time banishment, and his final victory in the official recognition of his school as the True School -- was historically not an isolated event but only part of a larger movement which may be correctly characterized as an internal reformation of revolution in Buddhism, a movement that had been fermenting and spreading throughout the eighth century in many parts of China. . . Shen Hui himself was a product of a revolutionary age in which the great minds in the Buddhist and Ch'an schools were, in one way or another, thinking dangerous thoughts and preaching dangerous doctrines. . . Shen Hui was a political genius who understood the signs of the times and knew what to attack and how to do it. So he became the warrior and statesman of the new movement and fired the first shot of the revolution. His long life, his great eloquence and, above all, his courage and shrewdness saved the day and a powerful orthodoxy was crushed. What appeared to be an easy and quick victory was probably due to the fact that his striking tactics of bold and persistent offensive attacks and his simple and popular preaching. . . had won for himself and his cause a tremendous following among the people.

Dr. Hu Shih concludes this somewhat exuberant description by showing how the poets, intellectuals, and all the radical and liberal elements gathered together with the Ch'an iconoclasts to win a sweeping revolutionary victory (in the cultural rather than in the military sense). And he concludes: "To them the victory must have meant a great liberation of thought and belief from the old shackles of tradition and authority."¹

It is possible to stand back from these statements of Hu Shih and view them a little critically. They do reflect the conceptions and even cliches of a mind trained in American universities such as Columbia and Cornell, impregnated with pragmatism and with the influence of Dewey, as well as with the standard notions of a democracy shaped by European and American history, the enlightenment, and so on. There is nothing exactly wrong

1. Hu Shih, "Ch'an (Zen) Buddhism in China: Its History and Method," in *Philosophy East and West*, Vol. III, No. 1, April 1953, University of Hawaii Press, Honolulu, p. 13.

with this, but it does give a slightly distorted perspective, as if Shen Hui were at the same time a kind of Luther and also something of a Voltaire, or indeed a Lenin. He comes out looking very much like a revolutionary activist of the European type. But if we get this impression, we fail entirely to see the uniqueness of a purely Asian approach, founded not in the dynamics of reasoned strategy and well-planned attack, but in the totally different insights that emanate from the void and from *wu-wei* (non-action). What is remarkable in Shen Hui is not just strength of character and tactical genius -- though we need not deny him these qualities. But what really marks him out as extraordinary is that his action was at the same time his Ch'an, his "contemplation" (though the word simply does not apply here). The impact of his action, preaching and teaching derived not from strength and application of will-power (still less of will-to-power) but from a will-lessness endowed with lucid and total efficacy and a mind-lessness that was free from pedestrian political figuring. But Shen Hui was not an irrational, pseudo-mystical demagogue on the Fascist pattern. Far from it. How then are we to comprehend a life of contemplative action grounded in non-action and no-mind?

It must be made clear that on this point there is a radical difference between East and West, and if this difference is overlooked one will fall into the sin of finding "Zen" here, there and everywhere in Western literature when it is in fact seldom found there at all. Take for example the literature of "the absurd" in the West: Kafka, Camus and so on. The mere fact that this literature represents a reaction against the heritage of bourgeois rationalism and liberal enlightenment does not make it in any sense "Zen." Western literature, philosophy and religion are underlain by a tendency to regard the universe either as mystery or as antagonist: a mystery to be entered by some awesome mystic initiation or an antagonist to be opposed with stoic courage. Greek tragedy and philosophy set the tone for this; modern science and technology have amplified it a hundredfold. Western man is essentially Promethean, and therein lies both his greatness and his absurdity. He does possess ways of escape from the dilemmas into which he is thrown by his endemic willfulness. The kenotic theology of Christian self-emptying is the most radical of them all -- but it seldom really appeals to him. Another is his sense of humor. The great comic writers of the West, from Cervantes and Rabelais to Joyce (and in a much lesser way Brecht, Kafka and Camus) have tried to help with their potent exorcisms. But still they show the comic epic hero in his pitiable humanity and isolation opposing the antagonistic world with all that he has. And (says a critic) "it is

not much -- merely free will and a capacity for love."²

The East on the other hand does not try to beat or cajole the universe or the gods. It tries to join them. So of course does the Western stoic. But the Western stoic regards this problem as one of antagonistic *wills*, to be reconciled by obedience or overcome by dogged refusal -- "Better to reign in hell than serve in heaven!" The East regards it more as a matter of ignorance and enlightenment. Ch'an, and especially Shen Hui, further simplifies the question: to fight nature and the world is sheer illusion, for this assumes that we are somehow outside the world and not really part of it. Furthermore, the world itself is not an objective whole of which we are a part -- nor is it one great pantheistic substance -- but is itself void. There is then nothing to oppose and nothing to join. There is nothing to be reconciled. The opposition itself is the radical illusion. What is to be done then is to stop thinking in terms of this illusion. But all "thought" is affected by the illusion. Should one then stop thinking altogether? No. For that would perpetuate the same illusion (the illusion that one could effectively will to stop thinking).

This question of no-mind and non-action, which is absolutely central to the Ch'an of Shen Hui, is not accounted for by the historical analysis of Hu Shih, brilliant though it may be. Daisetz Suzuki grasped this, and demolished Hu Shih's argument that the insight of Shen Hui was rational and intellectual -- a kind of enlightened debunking of religious superstition -- when it was in fact much more. The *chih* (knowledge, insight, gnosis-in-act) of Shen Hui is much more like what Kitaro Nishida called "pure experience" which is not "experience of" any special object or objects, but the very awakening of the ground of all existence. Thus the action of Shen Hui was in no sense a planned operation in which an objective was envisioned, willed and then attained. Shen Hui, of course, saw that the Northern School of Ch'an was somehow a stuffy and narrow conservatism allied with a backward political establishment. This does not mean that he conceived and cleverly executed a revolutionary plan to discredit this outdated doctrine. His attack on the Northern School was in some sense an attack on *will*, on the volitive execution of reasoned plans, the carrying out of system in Ch'an. But he did not overcome volition with volition. He did it with insight.

Nothing could be more misleading than to say, as someone has said, that Shen Hui (and Hui Neng) represented a "quietist trend" in Ch'an

2. Anthony Burgess, *Re Joyce*, Norton & Co., New York, 1968, p. 22.

because they preached a “sudden enlightenment” which was not the result of systematic discipline and effort. On the contrary, it was the Northern School that was profoundly quietistic, even though it was at the same time profoundly voluntaristic. The Northern way of gradual enlightenment -- preached by another Master whose name is so like Shen Hui that it must be read carefully to avoid disastrous confusions (Shen Hsiu) -- advocated the practice of enforced, studied, systematic tranquillity. One *willed* to withdraw, one *willed* to meditate, concentrate, to “wipe the mirror” of the mind clear of all “dust” -- or all taint of conceptual thought. One *willed* to empty the mind in order to converge in purity and emptiness. This was all planned and directed to a *willed* consummation: the “realization” or “illumination” of a perfectly pure emptiness as the ground of all. Shen Hui’s reply to all this was:

To converge one’s mind with volition, to adhere to the concepts of voidness and purity, to seek to realize enlightenment and nirvana, all these are illusory. Only by avoiding volition will the mind be rid of objects. A mind unconscious of any object is void and tranquil by nature.³

This is of course a quotation that cannot be understood outside the context of Shen Hui’s whole teaching. If we read it superficially we will inevitably tend to fall back into the same error Shen Hui is refuting: the error of concluding “if the mind that is unconscious of an object is tranquil, then I must empty my mind of all objects.” This is the teaching of the Northern School. Shen Hui’s teaching is not that the mind *must* be emptied, but that it is empty in the first place, and what “fills” it is the ground of volition or craving that Buddhism calls *avidya*, the ignorance that wills itself as a willing self. To will the mind to be empty is to fill it with a ground of willed content and therefore to will it to be not-empty. What then? Should we will to destroy will? Should we will to be will-less? This too is absurd.

Destruction of affectivity should not be called *nirvana*; realization of the fact that affectivity has never come into being at all can be called *nirvana*.⁴

In the debate between Hu Shih and Daisetz Suzuki, one of the main issues was whether or not Shen Hui can be called “logical.” If we consider carefully the statements above in the light of the controversy between the two schools, it must be admitted that the most rigorous and sophisticated logic is on the side of Shen Hui. The Northern School suffers, like so many artificial systems, from a basic illogicality. It is built on self-contradiction. But Suzuki (who always emphasized the apparent irrationality of Ch’an) is

3. Kitaro Nishida, “Comments on Zen,” *Psychologia*, Kyoto, 1960, III, pp. 80-82.

4. *Ibid.*

also right when he insists that the validity of the Ch'an "argument" rests not so much on a correct sequence of propositions but on an original intuition which gives an internal consistency to all that follows.

The apparent irrationality of Ch'an is in fact what Nishida called the "rationality of anti-rationality."⁵ If our existence, as Nishida says, [is] fundamentally self-contradictory (since for him we are the "self-negation of the absolute"), we affirm ourselves only by denying ourselves. And this, by the way, is close to the existential logic of the Gospels and the New Testament. The real affirmation is beyond affirmation and negation (is in fact no-affirmation). It is the *kensho* or insight into the ground-nature attained by penetrating to the very root of our "contradictory self-identity." Anti-rational rationality is not, Nishida says, irrational. It is the result of thinking-through that entirely exhausts the thinking self and empties it at once of self, of logic and of thought. It is the final stripping away not only of all opinions and all dogmas but of the self that affirms and contradicts itself in the same breath every time it says "I think therefore I am." (For the Buddhist this also means "I think therefore I am not.")

Though Daisetz Suzuki was perhaps going too far in giving the impression that Zen defied logic at every turn, his views were right insofar as he was protesting against Hu Shih's short-sighted implication that Shen Hui was a sort of rationalist à la enlightenment. Nothing could be further from the truth.

It now becomes important to clarify one main point. What precisely was the essence of Shen Hui's Ch'an teaching? It is extremely important to know this; otherwise we will tend to view the struggle of the Northern and Southern Schools in terms of the doctrinal battles with which we are so familiar in the West. The term "orthodoxy" is very unfortunate in this connection. It should never be used of someone like Shen Hui. True, the historical struggle did take on the character of a struggle for official recognition. True, the revolutionary "victory" of Shen Hui which made the heart of Hu Shih beat faster was canonized by the declaration that Hui Neng was the Sixth Patriarch and Shen Hui was the Seventh. This was the same as saying they had transmitted the pure *dharma*. But the public and official declaration must be weighed against the statement of Shen Hui, that there is no *dharma*, and there is nothing in Buddhism that can be the object of a meaningful official approval; to canonize the pure is at the same time to canonize the impure along with it.

5. *Ibid.*

Curious that Shen Hui could at the same time “defeat” the Northern School and assert that the doctrine of gradual enlightenment was all wrong. Strange that he should want people to know this, and to embrace the way of sudden enlightenment: yet at the same time he should say that there “is no way.” Logical? Contradictory? Here we must admit that from the viewpoint of a short-sighted and merely empirical logic, Shen Hui is being absurd. But yet from a higher and more sophisticated viewpoint he is being utterly logical.

A concrete example of Shen Hui’s logic is this: the *kasaya* or *dharma* mantle of succession assumed tremendous official importance in the struggle between the Northern and Southern schools. The disciple who received the *kasaya* from his dying Master was approved as his true successor: he was entitled to speak with authority in the name of *dharma*. A certain kind of “logic” assumed that if one stole the *kasaya* one had the authority along with it. We are even told that things reached the point where monks were ready to kill each other for the *kasaya*. What about Shen Hui?

When Hui Neng died, Shen Hui came down the mountain with the *kasaya*. Naturally everyone wanted to know if he were the official successor. They asked:

Has it been transmitted to you?

It is not with me.

Who has received it?

If anyone has received it, he must know that himself. And if such a one preaches, the true law is spread everywhere and thereby vanishes of its own accord.

That gives a good insight into the mind of Shen Hui. Obviously what matters is not a “sign” of authenticity but authenticity itself. And true authenticity is not authentic doctrine, but, one might say, the absence of an “authentic doctrine” and the presence of an authentic mind. The task of the preacher — which Shen Hui accepted without qualms — was not correct exposition of orthodox theology, but a manifestation of the Buddha mind. This manifestation was not just a matter of revealing the Buddha as “another” mysteriously present behind or “in” the preacher himself, mystically shining through to the hearer. To impose this expectation upon the hearer was to make it impossible for him to grasp the true teaching. If the Master were to communicate to others that there is a direct knowledge without medium between the knower and the known, then he must not place any medium between them. He must not put his teaching in the way, or himself in the way. He must teach them in the simplest language that there *is no teaching*.

Yet this must be set in a framework of language. Shen Hui took as his framework the familiar Buddhist teaching about *sila* (morality), *dhyana* (meditation) and *prajna* (wisdom, insight, contemplation) and presented them in a revolutionary form.

Instead of starting out to be virtuous and to practice good works, especially the work of meditation; instead of willing to attain to contemplative wisdom; instead of starting out to "follow a way" -- one "leaves the way" (my expression is borrowed from St. John of the Cross). Instead of finding the "right road" one recognizes that there is no road. And there is no road because there is nowhere to go. Thinking that there is somewhere to go, that there is something that must be attained, is the basic illusion. *Sila*, then, is not to let this illusion arise in us. *Dhyana* is freedom from this illusion by non-volition -- including not wanting to attain anything. *Prajna* is awareness that there is no illusion anyway. And these three, Shen Hui adds, are all the same. They are the recognition that no-seeing is the true-seeing.

This may sound a little obscure, but it has momentous consequences in concrete life. It is by no means esoteric. It shows that the Northern School has got the whole of Buddhism turned upside down and standing on its head because of the ingrained defect of voluntaristic quietism. But at the same time, this static, inert, dead, self-defeating routine of concentration lends itself very well to the purposes of a conservative and authoritarian social establishment. The imperial government was well aware of the fact that a flourishing monastic order, with thousands of monks engaged in concentration, provided a stabilizing religious base for society. Somehow it seems that the government did not fully realize to what extent Shen Hui was denouncing all this as mystification and fakery.

On the other hand it would be absolutely wrong to suppose that the Ch'an of Shen Hui dispensed entirely with all "practice." If Shen Hui asserted that the Northern School was wrong in trying to attain illumination by practice and systematic effort, it was because he saw that such effort was meaningless and wasted if they were based on an illusory objective: and that unless there was some experience to begin with, practice would remain an obstacle and an illusion. This is the real meaning of the doctrine of sudden enlightenment. In the Ch'an of Shen Hui, one does not gradually build up to an experience but one *begins with an experience*. This experience is not the fruition and confirmation of a doctrine, but is an explosive realization that doctrines and systems are built on illusion. Once this realization is present, then one can and must develop it in meditation and action. But the meditation and action are only further expressions of the

experience itself. In simple words, the Ch'an of Shen Hui is based on the radical assertion that unless one has some enlightenment one cannot even begin to meditate for he does not know what he is doing. Until one has oneself awakened, the thing to do is to live with an awakened Master -- who fully knows what he is doing -- and hope to be awakened by him. The Master however will take great care to avoid giving any impression that the awakening is something systematic or the result of a magically efficacious technique.

Thus Shen Hui made it perfectly clear that this obsession with *nirvana* as an end to be attained through will and effort was completely self-defeating. What is self-defeating is deadly. It eventually fills the whole atmosphere of society with the odor of corruption. As Shen Hui put it, concentration in inertia will lead only to the complete failure of meditation.

When a hovering bird stays motionless at a point in the sky it will inevitably fall to the ground. Similarly when one practices the "non abiding mind" and yet still abides in something, he will not be emancipated.

This brings us to the real point. If *dhyana*, *prajna*, *sila* are all one, and if they are nothing but life itself, then the thing to do is not to stop life, like the bird stopping itself in mid-flight, but to *go on living* even though life may be a contradiction. Instead of being like a bird with an absurd project to stop dead in mid-air and thus attain *prajna*, one should go on flying with the awareness that *prajna*, *dhyana* and *sila* are *not something other than the flight itself*. Life itself is all of these. Therefore, Ch'an does not consist in stopping life in mid-flight, but in flying and living as spontaneously as a bird. Is there nothing more? There is much more: there is the sudden enlightenment in which life is *fully experienced* as at once illusionless and mindless: as *prajna*. *At this point meditation and morality can really begin*. Once one "sees" life as it is, illusionlessly, mindlessly, unfettered by compulsion and artificiality and formalism, once one sees that there is nothing else to it: that meditation is not *more than* living, or anti-living, but living without explanation and without attachment to the self-contradiction which is life. Life lived without attachment is itself meditation and enlightenment. One does not meditate in order to live, or live in order to meditate, one lives meditating and meditates living, and the two are not separate. They are a living-dying life in which one is not aware of meditating on death or on life.

It was here of course that Ch'an became supremely dangerous. Conservatives attacked it furiously as total lawlessness, as "godlessness" (if a somewhat inexact word may be used), as utter impiety and revolution. And it was. For evidently, though the masses did not all at once become

“enlightened” in the Buddhist sense, they seem to have grasped some of the implications of this radical kenoticism. In any event, it is clear that Shen Hui’s Ch’an is anything but unworldly, inert, or static. It is anything but an evasion of ordinary life, though the reader who is mystified by the verbal fencing in his dialogues and the formal Buddhism of his discourses may be disturbed by something so remote and unfamiliar.

A modern Chinese scholar, Liang Chi Ch’ao, saw how much this Ch’an had in common with the vitalism of a Bergson and regretted that it was not better known in the West. Since then, writers like Suzuki have made it well known, and the effect upon thinkers like Heidegger, Tillich, Fromm and others has not been negligible. But still, the dialogue with Ch’an has yet really to begin. Too many Westerners are still obsessed with the idea of a Ch’an or Zen that is purely a matter of introversion, concentration, and head-splitting ventures in attaining *satori*. The Ch’an of Shen Hui is the exact opposite of any such thing. In Liang Chi Ch’ao’s words, it “can truly be considered as practical Buddhism and worldly Buddhism It enables the way of renouncing the world and the way of remaining in the world to go hand in hand without conflict.”

The religious genius of the Far East, China and Japan is the *only one* that has so far achieved this perfect resolution of any possible conflict between “action and contemplation.” In the West we are still hung up in an inexorable division between activists who run around in circles claiming that their hectic and ulcer-forming busyness is “prayer” and contemplatives (so-called) who are completely immersed in liturgical projects, or devout pieties which are justified as supremely efficacious activities. This is not to criticize Christian spirituality as such: but there is a fatal division in Western thinking which makes this kind of split almost inevitable. The ground of the division is the Western obsession with will, achievement, production, self-affirmation and power Perhaps this reminder that Shen Hui is talking about the ground of existence and not about a religious system may help you to understand him better.