

# Hoofprint of the Ox

Principles of the Chan Buddhist Path  
as Taught by a Modern Chinese Master



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*Chan and "Emptiness":  
Chan and the Classical Buddhist Path*

The word *chan* (Wade-Giles romanization: *ch'an*), from which Chan Buddhism, or Zen Buddhism, takes its name, is a Chinese transliteration of the Indian Buddhist term *dhyāna*, meaning "meditative concentration" or "meditative practice." Applied specifically to the Chan or Zen school, it carries the particular sense of the cultivation and experience of enlightenment itself, and not just any sort of meditative experience. Thus Chan Buddhism is often characterized as the school of meditative experience and enlightened insight par excellence, for it claims to embody and transmit the living wisdom that Siddhārtha Gautama achieved when he became the Buddha, or "enlightened one."

As the timeless insight that informed the Buddha's fashioning and preaching of the Buddhist doctrine, this enlightenment can be said to both precede and stand apart from the spoken word of the Buddhist sūtras. Yet, at the same time, it is intimately connected to the sūtras and the spoken dharma, as it is the very subject around which they orbit. Indeed, the scriptures take enlightenment as their foundation and their goal, aspiring to point the way to it, as a finger might point to the moon or a raft might be constructed to help one reach the other shore. The living wisdom to which the Buddha awakened and to which his spoken teachings aspire is the heart of Buddhist tradition in all its forms.

This being the case, Chan is not something utterly distinct from the sūtras, much less antagonistic to them, for it embodies the very insights that the sūtras seek to express, allowing for a profound complementarity between the two: what is stated in words in the Buddhist scriptures will be confirmed in fact in the course of Chan practice, while what is experienced in Chan practice will resonate immediately with what is written in the sūtras.

Today, one hears many American students say that, as practitioners of Zen or Chan, they do not need to learn or think about the Buddhist sūtras and their teachings. Just sitting in *zazen* is the real practice, reading and studying written words is for soulless pedants and academics. In China, Korea, and Japan, where knowledge of the Buddhist teachings was widespread, such a rejection of the written word makes poignant sense. This, however, is a dangerous attitude in a culture that has no native traditions of Buddhist learning of which to speak. For silence, in and of itself, is anything but innocent or neutral, much less free of ignorance. How the more problematic it becomes when it is blissful!

Both Chan/Zen and the sūtras are the wisdom of the Buddha, and between the two there is no real discrepancy. Without the Buddha's word, how would we ever hear about or think to seek the dharma, much less begin to fulfill our vow to help others on the path to enlightenment? If one has already set out on the path of Chan, what is this "enlightenment" that one is seeking? What are the aims of Chan practice? What does it entail and how does it work? If one did start to ask such questions about Chan, one would probably hear a lot of aphorisms, sayings, and stories from previous masters, all of them gleaned from books. If one started to look into this literature, one would soon discover that it is more extensive than any other school of East Asian Buddhism, even the doctrinal ones! Indeed, to be a good priest or Zen master in Japan, one must be trained in this literature through and through. One would also find that the ancient Chan masters and patriarchs were themselves highly literate individuals, whose teachings were deeply imbued with the language of the Buddhist sūtras. Moreover, of all the specialized ideas that one might come across, by far the most common would be liberating insight or wisdom (C. *zhibui*; S. *prajñā*) and its correlate teachings of "emptiness" (C. *kong*; S. *śūnyatā*), "having nothing to obtain" (C. *wu suode*; S. *anupalabdha*), and "having no place to stand or abide" (C. *wu suozhu*; S. *apratisthā*).

Bodhidharma, the twenty-eighth Indian patriarch and first Chinese patriarch of Chan, once remarked, "The Buddhas expound the Dharma of emptiness in order to eradicate the myriad false views. But should you then cling to emptiness, even the Buddhas will be unable to do anything to help you. When there is arising, it is only emptiness that arises; when there is perishing, it is only emptiness that perishes. In reality, nothing whatsoever arises or perishes."<sup>1</sup>

The sixth Chinese patriarch, Huineng (638–713), once said, "In this teaching of mine, from ancient times up to the present, all have established no-thought (or no-mind) as the main doctrine, non-form as the substance, and non-abiding as the basis. Non-form is to be separated from form even when associated with form. No-thought is not to think even when involved in thought. Non-abiding is the original nature of humankind."<sup>2</sup> The great Chan master, Linji (d. 866/67), said: "I don't have a particle of Dharma to give to anyone.

All I have is cure for sickness, freedom from bondage. You followers of the Way from here and there, try coming to me without depending on anything." Or, "I tell you, there's no Buddha, no Dharma, no practice, no enlightenment. Yet you go off like this on side roads, trying to find something. Blind fools!"<sup>3</sup> Thus, we find throughout Chan history instances where the scriptural teaching of "emptiness" is equated with the heart of Chan practice.

If one looks through the Hīnayāna, Mahāyāna, and Vajrayāna scriptures, one will find that they talk endlessly of the need to realize *prajñā* or "insight and wisdom." In Hīnayāna teaching, the simple hearing of the Four Noble Truths, and the resolve to seek a solution to the miseries of birth and death (S. *saṃsāra*), is a kind of *prajñā* insight. But in its most profound sense, *prajñā* is nothing short of the living insight—born of meditation—that eliminates the defilements that keep one bound to the cycle of *saṃsāra*. What that insight discloses is that suffering, in all its forms, is the reified product of false views and topsy-turvy thinking. By awakening deeply to the fact that existence is problematic rather than pleasant, that existence is fleeting rather than stable, and that, as persons, we are not the discrete and enduring "selves" (S. *anātman*) that we have always thought we were, a world that was formerly experienced as a tangle of conflict (S. *dukkha*) is transformed into the ease and illumination of *nirvāṇa*.

In the Mahāyāna sūtras, *prajñā*, or insight, continues to carry the same transformative power, but to an even deeper level. Through the "perfection of insight or wisdom" (S. *prajñā-pāramitā*)—what the sūtras aptly call the "mother of the Buddhas"—the bodhisattva acquires the wisdom that enables one to deliver others from suffering along with oneself. Upon awakening to the fact that every aspect of mental and physical experience is empty of absolute "own-being" (S. *svabhāva*)—that every individualized moment or object is dependently interconnected with and contingent upon everything else—the bodhisattva sees the unconditioned world of *nirvāṇa* and conditioned world of *saṃsāra* as perfectly interfused. In so doing, he or she perfects the wisdom, compassion, and skill-in-means that culminates in the supreme perfect enlightenment of a Buddha. The *Heart Sūtra* (*Mahāprajñāpāramitā-hṛdaya Sūtra*) says, "Relying on this perfection of wisdom, the bodhisattva's mind is freed of impediment, and by dint of his freedom from impediment, he is free of fear and departs far from illusory thinking, thereby realizing the highest *nirvāṇa*. All Buddhas of the three times acquire supreme, perfect enlightenment by relying on this perfection of wisdom (S. *prajñā-pāramitā*)."

In the Vajrayāna, this insight into "emptiness" (*śūnyatā*), wherein *saṃsāra* and *nirvāṇa*, wisdom and skill-in-means, and enlightenment and afflictions are experienced as identical, is itself the "bliss-void" of the Tantric adept. In the Chan tradition, too, the insight of *śūnyatā* is the foundation of Chan practice. One could say that Chan enlightenment is itself none other than an awakening to *śūnyatā*.

The classical Buddhist teaching of "emptiness" and its corollary notions of "there being nothing whatsoever to obtain" and "there being nowhere to stand or dwell" provide an elemental point of connection between Chan practice and the Buddhist sūtras. But what does this concept of śūnyatā or "emptiness" mean, and how is it represented in different Buddhist scriptural sources? How, furthermore, might this Buddhist concept or experience of emptiness stand in relation to experiences of revelation or meditative transport espoused in other religious traditions? In the interest of a better understanding of Chan as a Buddhist tradition, let us look more closely at these questions.

*Emptiness as a Conventional, or Mundane, Experience*

Notions akin to Buddhist emptiness may be found in a number of areas of conventional discourse. For example, one might have a very powerful dream or nightmare, to the point of breaking out in perspiration or leaping up in confusion; but upon fully waking up, one is suddenly relieved to find that the entire episode never occurred—that it was a dream, never real. Even so, one may still recall vividly the emotional grip of the experience. Then again, while watching a magic show, one may be taken in by the sleight of hand; when seeing heat rising off a road, one may think it water; or one's senses might be confused by the play of light and shadow, as when mistaking a coil of rope for a snake. At that moment the perception is experienced as fully real, bringing with it the full range of associated emotional and physical responses. Although we are taken in by the magic performance, we know that our eyes are deceiving us. On closer inspection, we realize that the perception was an illusion; normality reasserts itself and the responses vanish as swiftly as they arose. All of these are familiar experiences, which we typically refer to as illusions, misperceptions, deceptions, or even hallucinations—instances where we take or experience something to be real that is, in fact, not real.

Rather than appealing to the consistency of sensory habit or conventional experience to distinguish between what is real and what is "empty," or false, philosophical speculation might raise questions about the reality of basic convictions that we hold about existence. Materialists, for example, hold that there is no soul or existence after death, or at least that no such claim can be substantiated. The soul is not eternal, and they act according to this conviction. Life is like a lamp that simply goes out when its fuel is spent. Because it is ephemeral and a play of matter, existence for them is "empty" of ultimate value or grander purpose, as is any system that imposes such a scheme on the world.

Yet another kind of emptiness is experienced in intense religious prayer, devotion, or meditative contemplation. Through spiritual disciplines of this sort,

people will sometimes experience sudden relief from the burdens and anxieties of everyday existence, as though one was redeemed from a "sinful" or lower form of existence and reborn in spirit to a truer and higher life. The old self and its purposes may suddenly seem false, unreal, empty.

Sometimes these moments are accompanied by deep experiences of ecstatic transport or mystical rapture, wherein one's whole sense of time, space, and person may undergo radical changes. Beneath the surface of ordinary existence, a more fundamental reality or sense of being is discovered. The usual limitations of body, mind, and environment may vanish, to the point of feeling that one partakes of an eternal and divine existence that utterly transcends or subsumes the world at large. One's sense of subjective being may drop away or expand ecstatically, interfusing with the outer world and forming an inseparable unity with the universe.

One may think that one has experienced God, that one is God, or that one has been appointed as a spokesperson of God. Everyday concerns may suddenly appear sinful, profane, or mundane in contrast to the overwhelming power of the newfound reality, calling one to make a life mission of preaching this truth to others. Often, individuals of this sort become great religious leaders, philosophers, artists, or civic leaders. And indeed, an ordinary person may well consider someone who has had this kind of experience to be blessed, or to be a saint or sage.

Many religious traditions offer detailed taxonomies of the various types and levels of religious transport of this sort. The Buddhist tradition classifies this kind of experience under the rubric of dhyāna, or "states of meditative concentration and absorption." Altogether, four grades of dhyāna are distinguished, with an additional four categorized under "formless *samāpatti*." They range from coarse to subtle, with the bliss and rapture characteristic of the lower dhyānas progressively giving way to increasingly boundless sensations of space and consciousness in the formless *samāpattis*.

The distinctions among these different stages of concentration are very technical and involved. What is important to remember about the Buddhist perspective, however, is that these are all considered to be somatically induced experiences still subject to the reifications of deluded existence. The insight into no-self and the "emptiness" of phenomena that is the hallmark of genuine *prajñā* is still missing. Because these meditative states are shaped and tainted by deluded views, we characterize them as worldly and unenlightened. Whatever novel forms of insight or wisdom they may be held to bring, we likewise refer to as conventional. In order to clearly demarcate this sort of "lower" meditative state from genuine experiences of insight and liberation, the Buddhist tradition refers to the dhyānas and their like as "mundane" (S. *laukika*), or "possessed of defiling outflows" (S. *sāsravas*). The meditative experiences associated with genuine insights of emptiness, no-self, and no-mind are designated "supramundane" (S. *lokottara*) and "undefiled," or "devoid of outflows" (S. *anāsrava*).

Why is it that we refer to such sublime experiences as dhyāna as merely conventional or mundane? The ordinary, or profane, personality and the coarse forms of selfish craving associated with it may, indeed, have disappeared, but deluded views and attachment to the thought or construct of self are still prevalent. Everything that a person does or experiences under the influence of such states is still structured by the delusions and infatuations of self. The difference here is that the conventional limitations of body and mind have been dissolved, and self is now functioning on an extraordinarily expanded and vast scale. Small self has become a great self, small mind a big mind. All the same, the “universal oneness,” “supreme self,” “ultimate reality,” or “supreme being” that one experiences or identifies with is still “my” supreme being or self. In sum, it is because these experiences still orbit around and are colored by the thought of self that we call them conventional.

#### *The One-sided Emptiness of the Hīnayānist View of No-Self and Nirvāṇa*

Where there is ignorance and false view, there is craving and hatred; where there are the passions of craving and hatred, there is karma-producing action, retribution, and suffering. Only when there is a thoroughgoing penetration of false views and total letting go of attachment can there be said to be enlightenment, freedom, and true peace.

If one goes a step further and looks deeply into the experiences described above, one will find them closely bound to a thought of self and attachment to self: “I” experience “reality”; “I” know “God”; “I” am “one” with all things. But if you are “one” or you are “ultimate reality,” then where is there room for this “you”? One could say that the self and its egoistic attachments reach cosmic proportions with the thought that it perceives some ultimate reality or God. If one were then to investigate the subtle influences of egoistic thinking that pervade one’s moment-to-moment experience, one may find that there really is no fixed and permanent self.

What we generally regard as self is no more than a chain of momentary thoughts or impressions—a thought construct, if you will. A “self” is not to be found anywhere outside this momentary arising and perishing of conscious thought. Observing the mind’s activity like this, one may suddenly experience the insight that mind itself is wholly shifting, unlocalized, and impermanent; or that the subjective “self” is just a thought, an “empty” construct to which we cling needlessly. Rather than the source of all truth and comfort, “self” is the source of petty craving, fear, frustration, and sorrow. By letting go of the thought of self and pacifying its negative influences, one experiences a thoroughgoing release from the pain of saṃsāra. This is known as the unconditioned peace of nirvāṇa and “no-self.”

Although, in principle, one at this point may be said to be free from saṃsāra,

there may still be a problem, for if one should set up the idea that the and saṃsāra are wholly “painful” and “false,” and cling to the insight of no-self or the emptiness of nirvāṇa as “real,” then it becomes a biased emptiness where fear and selfish attachment are still present.

#### *Genuine Emptiness, or Emptiness as Ultimate Reality*

The biased attachment to nirvāṇa and the emptiness of self is a problem that Mahāyāna Buddhism, or the Buddhism of the “Great Vehicle,” routinely attributes to the Hīnayāna, or the Buddhist teachings of the “Lesser Vehicle.” The Mahāyānists hold that Śākyamuni Buddha preached the painfulness (S. *duḥkha*) of saṃsāra and the goal of extinction in nirvāṇa in order to prepare beings who were deeply attached to conventional existence for the “higher” teaching of the Mahāyāna. Thus, it is regarded as a preparatory expedient to the Mahāyāna. However, failing to recognize this fact, certain persons are said to have clung to the Hīnayāna as the Buddha’s final word, thereby fostering an obsessive attachment to “no-self” and to the extinction of nirvāṇa. According to the Mahāyāna view, such individuals still carry the false view and fear that the flux of saṃsāra is real, as a result of which they reify and cling to nirvāṇa and the emptiness of “no-self.” Mahāyāna seeks to correct this error by teaching a thoroughgoing emptiness of saṃsāra—an emptiness of both self and the phenomenal flux of sensory activity.

Previously, we described emptiness as the insight that “self” is a false construct or sense of continuity that is projected into the flow of momentary thoughts and impressions. When these impressions and sensory fluctuations are no longer appropriated as self, they become pacified and ultimately cease. With the Mahāyāna view of “emptiness of self” and “emptiness of concomitant objects,” we go a step further and realize that the factors that make up this moment-to-moment flow of mental experience themselves have no inherent existence or reality. They arise, combine, transform, and dissipate as a mutually interrelated nexus of causes and conditions. Each constituent factor in the moment-to-moment field of experience is itself contingent upon this network of causes and conditions, and there is absolutely no arising, cessation, or abiding existence of any factor or phenomenon apart from this cause and condition.

As the great Mahāyāna teacher Nāgārjuna once observed, “Nowhere and at no time can an object be found to exist through origination from itself, from another, from both, or from no cause whatsoever.”<sup>5</sup> Like the interstices in a net, the entire nexus of cause and condition, with all its individual elements, is “empty” and “void.” Thus, in contrast to the simpler idea of “emptiness of ‘self’ as subjective ego or person” (S. *puṅgala-nairātmya*), the Mahāyāna vehicle advances the notion of “emptiness of ‘self-existence’ of the dharmas, or psycho-physical constituents, themselves” (S. *dharmā-nairātmya*). With the latter step, saṃsāric

existence appears as intrinsically identical with the emptiness of *nirvāṇa*, since no phenomenon (*dharmā*) exists except by cause and condition. The Hīnayānist is freed from fear of *saṃsāra* and attachment to *nirvāṇa* by the simple insight that there is no *saṃsāra* to renounce or *nirvāṇa* to apprehend. What appears to be two are, in fact, not-two, but a single middle way. By abiding directly in *saṃsāra*, one abides simultaneously in *nirvāṇa*.

While existence is itself understood to be empty and identical with *nirvāṇa*, Mahāyāna teaching nonetheless continues to distinguish between "ultimate reality" (S. *paramārtha-satya*) as revealed in the light of *prajñā* and the world of conventional existence in which that ultimate reality is "concealed from view" (S. *saṃvṛti-satya*). In order to convey the ontological and soteriological importance of this ultimate reality, Mahāyānists have attached a number of other substantivist terms to it, such as "true thusness, or suchness" (S. *tathātā*), "dharma-nature" (S. *dharmatā*), the "un arisen or unoriginated" (S. *anutpatika*), or the "true nature of all dharmas" (S. *sarvadharmabhūtatā*). However, one must always view these expressions in keeping with the actual import of the Mahāyāna teaching of emptiness, wherein the true nature or true character of all things is, in fact, no characteristic, no nature.

*Dharma Totally Embodied and the Totally Forgotten:  
Emptiness in the Absolute or Highest Sense*

It is easy to think that such expressions as "the unconditioned or unarisen nature of dharmas," "suchness," and "genuine emptiness" refer to some metaphysical essence separate from or hidden beneath the phenomenal world with which we are familiar. However, this view is mistaken, for phenomena in and of themselves are empty, non-arising, and non-perishing; and this non-arising and non-perishing "nature" is itself absolutely identical to and not separate from phenomena. In this respect, it is wrong to think that the two extremes of "conventional existence" and "ultimate reality" have discrete reality or "own-being" in and of themselves. Emptiness does not eclipse phenomenal existence; phenomenal existence does not impede or eclipse emptiness. They are interfused and identical, one and the same. It is to express this free and dynamic interfusion that we "negate" the idea of emptiness and say that it is "not empty."

Let us put it another way. In our discussion of "genuine emptiness," we started with the conventional world of reified self and phenomena, then negated them to arrive at the intrinsic emptiness of both self and objects. This we referred to as the fundamental "suchness" of ultimate reality. Now we once again negate the notion that a fundamental "emptiness" or "suchness" might exist apart from phenomena. As such, we turn back and affirm "emptiness" as the "marvelous existence" of phenomena. Emptiness and phenomenal existence, *nirvāṇa* and *saṃsāra*, are simultaneously illumined and simultaneously negated. The ultimate "middle way" or "middle truth" that they represent is not a "mid-

dle" between extremes, nor a "truth" to be posited in contradistinction to "falseness." What we have is a single, dynamic, and inconceivable reality—a "non-middle" wherein there are no phenomena and yet all phenomena, no stance and yet all stances. Emptiness and the phenomenal world are totally forgotten and totally interfused in a singularly inconceivable and indescribable way. This is "absolute emptiness" or "emptiness in its highest sense."

But here it seems we are ever relegated to paradox, or an endless dialectic regress of assertion and negation. How, then, is one to express directly this vision of emptiness and identity of opposites? More important, what does it mean to live or embody this vision directly, to escape the limitations of dualistic thinking and dialectic, and directly know or speak of the inexpressible? When, where, and how does one make the leap from secondary description to primary experience, or from being a prisoner of discriminatory constructs to being their master?

On this point the *Vimalakīrti Sūtra* offers an instructive passage. In the course of the sūtra, the layman Vimalakīrti asks a group of illustrious bodhisattvas to each state his or her way of entering the gate of non-duality. One after another the bodhisattvas relate the dualistic extremes that must be transcended in order to know true emptiness: arising and perishing, darkness and light, *nirvāṇa* and *saṃsāra*, existence and emptiness, reality and unreality. Offering what seems to be the last word, the great Bodhisattva Mañjuśrī himself says: "When you can neither speak nor talk of any event, when you neither indicate nor know any 'thing,' when you pass beyond both questions and answers, this is entering the gate of non-duality."

Mañjuśrī then turns to Vimalakīrti himself and asks, "Sir, each of us has spoken. Now you yourself tell us how a bodhisattva enters the gate of non-duality."

At that point Vimalakīrti kept silent and did not utter a single word. Mañjuśrī thereupon praised him, saying, "Excellent! Excellent! This is truly entering the gate of non-duality!"<sup>6</sup>

Vimalakīrti's thunderous silence is a most eloquent demonstration of emptiness in its highest and most inconceivable form; and it is with this living enlightenment—emptiness not as a proposition but as an embodied experience—that Chan itself is identified. After all the talk about emptiness, one still comes back to things at hand; and it is these everyday activities that constitute the very ground and function of Chan enlightenment. The sixth patriarch, Huineng, stated that seeking enlightenment apart from the phenomenal world is like looking for horns on a rabbit. A second-generation spiritual descendant of Huineng, Mazu Daoyi (709–788), frequently asserted that the ordinary, everyday mind is itself the Way, or, that among all phenomena, there is none that is not already liberated. Chan master Linji urged his disciples to "just act ordinary, put on your clothes, eat your rice, pass the time with nothing particular to do."<sup>7</sup> A student once asked master Yunmen Wenyan (864–949), "Please, master, show me a road in?" To which the master replied, "Slurping gruel, eating rice."<sup>8</sup>