The Lineage of Ch’an: The Historian and the Believer

Hoyu ISHIDA

INTRODUCTION

One of the characteristics of Ch’an 禪 (“Zen” in Japanese) Buddhism is its method of handing down the Teaching—the direct transmission from teacher to disciple or Patriarch to Patriarch. Lineage has played a significant role in Chan and Zen. This lineage, coming down originally from the “Seven Buddhas of the Past” through various Patriarchs and masters in India, China and Japan, has been adopted as the source of legitimacy of Buddha-Dharma. Hui-neng 慧能 (638-717) is traditionally the most important and central figure in the history of Ch’an and Zen Buddhism, and is generally regarded as the Sixth Patriarch 第六祖 of the tradition which has dominated almost all the major trends of the later Ch’an and Zen movement up to today, although we are still uncertain about his historicity.

Some new facts have been revealed as a result of modern historical research in Ch’an Buddhism, especially in its early stage of formation, by scholars like Ui Hakuju, D.T. Suzuki, Sekiguchi Shindai, Hu Shih and Yanagida Seizan and Philip Yampolsky, who have had access to the manuscripts discovered at Tun-huang 敦煌. We have discovered, for example, many materials by Shen-hui 神会 (670-762), who greatly contributed to the rise of Hui-neng’s school and its later development with a message of sudden enlightenment 顿悟.

Yampolsky says that a two-fold movement took place through the eighth century in Ch’an Buddhism: “the attempt to establish Ch’an as a sect within the Buddhist teaching in general, and the attempt to gain acceptance for a particular school of Ch’an within the Chinese society in which it existed.”

People were trying to establish their own schools or sects by creating lineage as a source of legitimacy within Buddhism and to set up a new patriarchal tradition, in which the “true” message had been handed down directly from previous Buddhas and Patriarchs. The lineage that tradition claims, however, is not quite accurate in a historical sense. A historical inquiry of the Patriarchs has revealed that the lineage which Ch’an and Zen claims to have been directly transmitted from Patriarch to Patriarch in China is an invention created by those groups in the eighth century. This paper examines the traditional lineage of Ch’an that we have today and historians’ interpretation of it, and attempts to shed some light on the impact that historical research may have on the part of believers (followers) of the lineage. The paper will basically refer to Yanagida Seizan, a modern Zen scholar in Japan, and Philip Yampolsky, a leading American historian on the subject of Hui-neng and the Platform Sutra of the Sixth Patriarch.

In the formation of the Ch’an history, and continuing still today, Shen-hui, a disciple of Hui-neng, is the key figure. In his time, there was already a Ch’an group flourishing in northern China, in Loyang and Ch’ang-an, which relied on the Lankāvatārasūtra and had already developed its lineage. The major figure of this Lankāvatāra school is Shen-hsiu 神秀 (6057-706), a disciple of Hung-jen 弘忍 (601-674) the Fifth Patriarch. According to this school, Shen-hsiu is the Sixth Patriarch counting from Bodhidharma, and P’u-chi 普寂 (651-739), the successor to Shen-hsiu, was influential at the time of Shen-hui. Shen-hui, however, claimed that the teaching by Hui-neng of sudden and direct enlightenment was the authentic message transmitted correctly, and that the teaching of Shen-hsiu in northern China was the unorthodox line. He labeled Shen-hsiu’s teaching as gradual and inferior.2

A debate took place in 773 at the Ta-yün Temple in Hua-t’ai between Shen-hui and Chuang-yuan. Shen-hui argued against Chuang-yuan, rejecting the northern school of gradual enlightenment 漸悟 by P’u-chi and insisting on the legitimacy of orthodoxy of the southern school of sudden enlightenment. Shen-hui basically made two points at the debate, according to Yampolsky. The first was to try and establish Bodhidharma’s robe as a symbol of the transmission of the Dharma. The second was to refuse the accepted line of the transmission by substituting Hui-neng for Shen-hsiu.3 Shen-hui rejected the gradual approach of enlightenment advocated by Shen-hsiu and insisted that his interpretation of sudden enlightenment was the highest and truest teaching of Ch’an transmitted through Hui-neng. Politically, he established a new lineage, claiming that Hui-neng was the Sixth Patriarch, and that he himself was the Seventh Patriarch of the line, as recorded in the Yüan-chüeh ching ta-shu ch’ao 円覚經大疏鈔 by Tsung-mi 宗密 (780-841), a later and last transmitter of this line. This line of Shen-hui, however, died out after Tsung-mi.

The traditional lineage that we have had up to today is not the line of Shen-hui to Tsung-mi, although Hui-neng has become immovable as the Sixth Patriarch in the

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2 The Lankāvatāra school of Shen-hsiu was called the northern school (gradual enlightenment), while Shen-hui’s school was called the southern school (sudden enlightenment). See Hoyu Ishida, “The Problem of Practice in Shen-hui’s Teaching of Sudden Enlightenment” in Academic Reports of the University Center for Intercultural Education, the University of Shiga Prefecture, No. 1, December 1996, pp. 51-63.

3 Yampolsky, p. 27. Yanagida Seizan sums up the claims of Shen-hui at the debate in four points:

(1) Bodhidharma is the founder of the southern school and the one who transmitted the Ch’an of the Buddha.

(2) Upon having come to China, Bodhidharma met the Emperor of Liang and rejected his actions of building temples and images, helping monks, and copying sutras as non-meritorious.

(3) When Bodhidharma approved the enlightenment of Hui-k’o at the Shao-lin Temple in Chung-shan, he handed his robe to Hui’k’o as a symbol of the transmission of the Dharma.

(4) This robe had been actually handed down to Hui-neng, and he is the Sixth Patriarch of the correct southern school. See Yanagida in Kōza Zen III. Zen no rekishi – Chūgoku, ed. by Nishitani Keiji (Tokyo: Chikama Shobō, 1967), p. 38.
accepted tradition largely because of Shen-hui’s efforts. A new line of the school then arose and gained its popularity and power not in the northern cities like Nan-yang, Loyang and Ch’ang-an, but in the southern cities, Kiangsi and Hunan. These two places established their own lineage respectively, both having Hui-neng as the Sixth Patriarch. These new schools’ origins are not clear, but the legend and history that was created and handed down has become the tradition. We have many later sources, including the *Pao-lin chuan* 宝林伝 (801), the *Tsu-t’ang chi* 祖堂集 (952), the *Ching-te ch’uan-teng lu* 景德伝燈録 (1004-8) and the *Platform Sutra of the Sixth Patriarch* 六祖壇経 in which they devised a totally new tradition of the “Seven Buddhas of the Past” and the “Twenty-eight Indian Patriarchs.”

A new sect in Kiangsi was started by Nan-yüeh Huai-jang 南嶽懐譚 (677-744) and transmitted to his disciple, Ma-tsu Tao-i 馬祖道一 (709-788), who was largely responsible for the development of this school. The Lin-chi 臨済 (Rinzai in Japanese) school, known as a school which uses *kung-an* 公案 (kōan in Japanese), came out of this line of Nan-yüeh and Ma-tsu. Another school in Hunan was founded by Ch’ing-yüan Hsing-ssu 青原行思 (d. 740). His teaching was transmitted to his heir, Shih-tou Hsi-ch’ien 石頭希遷 (700-790) who greatly contributed to the rise of this school. The Ts’ao-tung 曹洞 (Sōtō in Japanese) school came out of this line of school. Dōgen 道元 (1200-1253) in Japan is probably the most well known Zen master today in this line. Both Yampolsky and Yanagida say that the connection of these two schools’ founders, Nan-yüeh and Ch’ing-yüan, with Hui-neng as the Sixth Patriarch is obscure. But by the beginning of the ninth century Hui-neng became the most important and central figure of Chinese Ch’an, and these schools with Nan-yüeh and Ch’ing-yüan have become the major, traditional lines of transmission of Ch’an and Zen.

The major traditional lines of lineage handed down up to today are summarized as follows:

**Seven Buddhas of the Past:**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rank</th>
<th>Buddha</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1st</td>
<td>Vipaśyin</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2nd</td>
<td>Śīkhin</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3rd</td>
<td>Viśvabhū</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4th</td>
<td>Krakucchanda</td>
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<tr>
<td>5th</td>
<td>Kanakamuni</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6th</td>
<td>Kāśyapa</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7th</td>
<td>Śākyamuni</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

These Seven Buddhas are all believed to have appeared in succession in this world, though Śākyamuni is the only figure who actually appeared in recorded history.

**Twenty-eight Indian Patriarchs:**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rank</th>
<th>Patriarch</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1st</td>
<td>Mahākāśyapa</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2nd</td>
<td>Ananda</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>27th</td>
<td>Prajñātāra</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>28th</td>
<td>Bodhidharma (d. 532)</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

**Chinese Patriarchs:**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rank</th>
<th>Patriarch</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1st</td>
<td>Bodhidharma (d. 532)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2nd</td>
<td>Hui-k’o (487-593)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3rd</td>
<td>Seng-ts’an (d. 606)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4th</td>
<td>Tao-hsin (580-651)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5th</td>
<td>Hung-jen (601-674)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
6th Patriarch: Hui-neng (638-717)

Two major lines succeeded up to today After Hui-neng:

(in Kiangsi) (in Hunan)
Nan-yüeh (677-744) Ch’ing-yüan (d. 740)
Ma-tsu (709-788) Shih-t’ou (700-790)

... expansion up to today in various lines ... expansion up to today in various lines
(China, Japan, USA, etc.) (China, Japan, USA, etc.)
including the Lin-chi (Rinzai) school including the Ts’ao-tung (Sōtō) school

We will now examine the early lineage claimed by Shen-hsiu or his followers of the northern school, which also, like Shen-hui’s school, died out at the latest in the ninth century. There are basically two lines: the one is that Shen-hsiu is the Sixth Patriarch in China. In many inscriptions for Shen-hsiu, the lineage is listed: 1) Bodhidharma, 2) Hui-k’o, 3) Seng-ts’an, 4) Tao-hsin, 5) Hung-jen, 6) Shen-hsiu and 7) Pu-chi. The Leng-chia shih-tzu chi 前伽師資記 (720) basically gives the same lineage, adding another Indian Patriarch before Bodhidharma. In this line, Shen-hsiu is the Chinese Sixth Patriarch, not Hui-neng. The other line is found only in the Ch’uan fa-pao chi 伝法宝紀 (710), in which the Sixth Patriarch is Fa-ju and the Seventh Patriarch is Shen-hsiu. What is fundamentally in common between these two lines of the northern school and the traditional lines of transmission up to today shown in the chart above is that the first five Chinese Patriarchs (Bodhidharma, Hui-k’o, Seng-ts’an, Tao-hsin and Hung-jen) are the same. That is, all the Ch’an and Zen schools claimed that their transmissions in lineage had been through the first five Patriarchs, who will be examined respectively next.

Bodhidharma is believed to have been a Brahman. He came from southern India to China to propagate Buddhism. He is the First Patriarch in China as well as the Twenty-eighth Patriarch in India. His true biography, however, is very obscure, and the famous accounts regarding the legend of Bodhidharma, according to Yanagida, such as meeting with the Emperor of Liang upon arriving in China, his nine-year experience of wall-gazing at Sung-shan, encountering Sung Yün of the Northern Wen on the way back to India on the day he died, and the tale of Hui-k’o’s self-mutilation, are simply legends. Tales of his legend and thought were created as a result of the demand of later people who needed to establish a new form of Buddhism, especially against T’ien-t’ai 天台 (Tendai in Japanese) Buddhism, which had been already established as a sect in the early T’ang dynasty (618-907). This new popular creed said that the essential teaching had been transmitted from Bodhidharma without relying on the scriptures—“transmission of mind through mind,” which they claimed as the characteristic of their school. They insisted that because of this direct transmission the core message of enlightenment had been handed down without any break and without corruption. In surviving sources, which Yanagida claims to be reliable, the Lo-yang chia-lan chi and the Lueh-pien ta-ch’eng ju-tao zu-lun hsü, however, there is no mention of the official transmission that later tradition insists on.

Yampolsky refers to the implication of a patriarchal succession in Tao-hsüan’s Hsü kao-seng chuan 統高僧傳 (645; an early basic history book about the biographies of high

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4 Yampolsky, pp. 10-11.
priests written by a non-Zen historian). In this text, Tao-hsüan 道瑾 does not make any mention of the transmission of the Ch’an teaching from Patriarch to Patriarch, although Tao-hsüan talks about Bodhidharma, Hui-k’o and Tao-hsin. Yampolsky here assumes that the concept of the transmission (lineage) did not exist in his time (Tao-hsüan died in 667), or that he was unaware of it. Yampolsky then says that “unless Tao-hsüan deliberately ignored it, it is probable that the concept of a patriarchal succession developed in the late seventh century, and had become generally accepted in Ch’an circles by the first decade of the eighth century, when the Ch’uan fa-pao chi was composed.”

The Ch’uan fa-pao chi (the northern text that drew largely upon the Hsü kao-seng chuan for its information) was compiled around 710 and is the one that lists Fa-ju as the Sixth Patriarch and Shen-hsiu as the Seventh Patriarch.

Traditionally, Hui-k’o, a disciple of Bodhidharma, and the Second Patriarch, was of the Chi family and a native of Wu-laow. He was originally a scholar of Confucianism but later turned to Buddhism. At the age of forty, he met Bodhidharma and practiced Buddhism for six years. The famous legend about him is that he cut off his left arm to show the earnestness of his desire for learning Buddhism, while showing no sign of emotion or pain. Yampolsky compares the two texts regarding Hui-k’o’s biography, the northern text of the Ch’uan fa-pao chi and the Hsü kao-seng chuan on which the Ch’uan fa-pao chi is based. He gives three significant points of departure: 1) the story of the cutting off of his arm is included in the Ch’uan fa-pao chi; 2) the account of Hui-k’o’s enemy, Tao-heng, who attempted to destroy him, is only briefly alluded to, while in the Hsü kao-seng chuan this account is vividly described; and most importantly 3), that whereas the Hsü kao-seng chuan records that Hui-k’o left no heirs, the Ch’uan fa-pao chi states specifically that he transmitted his teaching to Seng-ts’an, the Third Patriarch.

Yampolsky then concludes that “this again indicates that, if there was a patriarchal tradition in Ch’an at this time, Tao-hsüan had no knowledge of it. Indeed, we have no evidence to show that such a tradition existed before the Ch’uan fa-pao chi.”

The biography of Seng-ts’an is brief and ambiguous. Since the Hsü kao-seng chuan contains no separate biography, the Ch’uan fa-pao chi could not rely on it for its information; however, there is no way of knowing what source the Ch’uan fa-pao chi used. Much more material was added to Seng-ts’an’s legend through the eighth century: details were added to the story of his life and his biography became more complex later.

When it comes to Tao-hsin, the Fourth Patriarch, the account becomes more concrete, since the Hsü kao-seng chuan itself contains fairly detailed information about him. According to this text, when he passed the age of twelve, he went to study Buddhism with two unknown priests for ten years. When the teachers left to go to La-fu, although Tao-hsin wanted to accompany them, he was not allowed. He then remained there and later was permitted to become a priest and went to the temple of Chi-chou. According to the later version of the Ch’uan fa-pao chi, Tao-hsin left home at the age of seven and studied with an unidentified priest for six years. Around the end of the sixth century, he went to study under the Third Patriarch, and studied with him for eight or nine years. When the Third Patriarch left to go to La-fu, Tao-hsin also wanted to go with him, but the Third

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5 Ibid., p. 11.
6 Ibid., p. 12.
Patriarch did not permit him to come and told him to remain in order to spread the Dharma. Here we again find that the later version inserts a concept of lineage by adding a new story while the historical text does not refer to it at all.

Tao-hsin seems to have been widely known as a tremendous figure. In the *Hsū kao-seng-chuan*, we find an account of a miraculous event. When a band of robbers surrounded Chi-chou and the springs all ran dry (causing the people of Chi-chou to suffer), Tao-hsin arrived there. At the moment of his entering, the waters again flowed. He then had people recite the *Prajñāpāramitā-sūtras* loudly, which caused the bandits to disperse. This kind of episode shows that Tao-hsin was well regarded by many people for his ability and power; thus, many practitioners gathered around him. At Mount Shuang-feng, where he spent his last thirty years, he formed a new group under the influence of the San-lun 三論 (Sanron in Japanese) school and the T’ien-t’ai school. Though this group, as Yanagida says, was not under the influence of the *Lankāvatāra-sūtra*, which is the text that the northern school claimed later as their basic text, Tao-hsin was creating something new and different from San-lun and T’ien-t’ai. He had about five hundred students who came from all around. Hun-jen was one of his disciples.

The account of Hung-jen which appears in the *Ch’uan fa-pao chi* is very brief, since no account of Hung-jen is given in the *Hsū kao-seng chi*. According to the *Ch’uan fa-pao chi*, he was a native of Huang-mei. He left home at the age of thirteen to seek the Path. Tao-hsin, the Fourth Patriarch, soon recognized his capacities. One day Hung-jen spent the whole night sitting in meditation and attained enlightenment without reading any sutra. At the age of seventy-five he transmitted his teachings to Fa-ju and died.

As we have seen in the account of the first five Patriarchs in China, the transmission of lineage seems to be a creation. Yampolsky elaborates that the concept of a patriarchal succession developed in the late seventh century (the time of Shen-hsiu) and became generally accepted in Ch’an groups by the first decade of the eighth century. Along with the creation of legends and lineage, these Ch’an circles tried to establish their schools as a sect against the well-established sects like T’ien-t’ai.

One of the claims, as cited before, that Shen-hui made at the debate in 732 against the northern school was that Bodhidharma, upon having come to China and meeting the Emperor of Liang, rejected as non-meritorious the Emperor’s actions of building temples and images and copying sutras. This claim implies the negation of the then conventional Buddhism which was flourishing and enjoying glory. While it kept a close relationship with the royalty, who were chanting sutras and building temples as meritorious acts on one hand, while they were leading a luxurious life on the other hand, new circles (both north and south) were seriously seeking the Path independently. Shen-hui first criticized the corruption of the established schools of Buddhism at that time. As a way of bringing forth a new school or sect, he then had to appeal that he was claiming something characteristic, true and/or authentic. Ch’an Buddhism took up a patriarchal transmission of lineage, making unique the message of Bodhidharma—“transmission of mind through mind.” In this manner, they created a new tradition, incorporating old ones, and formed the lineage. The first Five Patriarchs are all the same both in the northern and southern schools.

8 Yampolsky, p. 13.
9 Yanagida, p. 22.
10 See also note 5.
Yampolsky says “much of the later material is either the product of the imagination of later writers or the recapitulation and embroidering of earlier unrecorded legend.”

(III)

Before Shen-hui claimed that Hui-neng was the true Sixth Patriarch of Bodhidharma’s Ch’an, Shen-hsiu had been regarded as the Sixth Patriarch by the Lankāvātāra school of the northern school, as mentioned before. It is useful to review the difference of position and teaching between the northern school (Shen-hsiu) and the southern school (Shen-hui or followers of Hui-neng). According to Shen-hui, the northern school advocates the gradual approach of concentration or meditation as a means for enlightenment, as one is still attached to the very fact that one is trying. On the other hand, the southern teaching advocates sudden enlightenment: one spontaneously or naturally becomes aware of one’s Buddha nature originally inherent in a person. This awareness of sudden enlightenment comes about the moment when one sees into one’s nature and throws away all the practices. A deeply deluded mind in essence or an obstacle to enlightenment in the end is an attachment to the very attempt to get rid of that delusion or the obstacle, and this attachment immediately takes place when one attempts it. In the metaphor of a mirror (Buddha nature) and polishing (practice) it, the gradual approach means trying to polish the mirror in order to make it clean. The sudden approach suggests that since the mirror is originally clean as it is, the act of polishing it makes it even dirtier. In the Platform Sutra of the Sixth Patriarch, while Shen-hsiu urges one to polish the mirror (Buddha nature) in order to make it clean, Hui-neng claims that since the mirror is originally clean and pure, there is no need of polishing it—one is already enlightened as he or she is.

This line or doctrine of Ch’an Buddhism of Hui-neng advocated by Shen-hui and his school became powerful. As more legends and details were created and attributed to each Patriarch, transmission verses were also invented and supplied as seen before. We find many new verses in the Platform Sutra (secs. 49, 50), which symbolize and attempt to legitimate the transmission of the teaching from one Patriarch to the next, and the practice

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11 Yampolsky, p. 14
12 According to Shen-hui, the northern school advocates one to 1) enter into samādhi (“meditation”) by concentrating one’s mind, 2) view tranquility by setting one’s mind, 3) illuminate outwardly by arousing one’s mind, and 4) verify inwardly by controlling one’s mind. These four verses which demonstrate well the point and position of the northern school often appear in the Pū-ti-ta-mo Nan-tsung ting ho-shang-fei ī lun. For example, see Hu Shih, Shen hui ho-shang i-chi (Shang hai, 1930), pp. 285-288 and Hoyu Ishida, Op. Cit., p. 3.

The point of Shan-hui’s criticism is that this kind of teaching or practice is “gradual” being a means to enlightenment, and that this very attempt to enlightenment itself is an attachment which prevents one from actually attaining enlightenment.

13 This text was written by Shen-hui or his group, or even by another group. See three theories presented by Carl Bielefeldt and Lewis Lancaster, “T’an Ching (Platform Scripture),” Philosophy East and West, vol. 25, no. 2, pp. 200-201. This text was probably composed much later than the works of Shen-hui.

14 The problem of practice remains in the position of Shen-hui’s sudden teaching, which rejects the practical notion of the northern school. If the very attempt to the attainment of enlightenment is labeled as “gradual” and a deluded mind, then what can one do or how can one start with? This issue on the problem of practice is discussed in Hoyu Ishida, Op. Cit.
of quoting these verses was used by later Ch’an histories. The lines through Nan-yüeh and Ch’ing-yüan with Hui-neng as the Fifth Patriarch have come to play a dominant part in the whole tradition of Ch’an and Zen with the message of sudden enlightenment.

( IV )

Much of Patriarchal lineage in its early stage of Ch’an and Zen is thus a creation or an invention, and the lineage was created as a counterpart against other established sects, playing a part in legitimacy to Buddha-Dharma. Ch’an then claimed that the teaching was transmitted through mind and from master to disciple. The creation took place throughout the eighth century, tracing the teaching back not only to Bodhidharma but also to the “Seven Buddhas of the Past” and “Twenty-eight Indian Patriarchs” and insisting on the legitimacy of Buddha-Dharma and the universality of its teaching. This is a conceivable view (though reduced) of Ch’an lineage seen as a result of the historians’ research. What then does this matter of lineage as a creation mean to the followers of the schools? Have they put prime importance on lineage as a proof of authentic and direct transmission of the teaching or truth?

Carl Bielefeldt poses a problem to the effect of historical research to Ch’an and the whole of Buddhism:

Buddhist doctrine, of course, does not rest on an historical message; and to that extent it is undamaged by any attack on its traditional view of history. Yet, it is a fact that the Ch’an and Zen schools in particular have placed great emphasis throughout their history on the importance of the actual transmission of the dharma from Śākyamuni through Bodhidharma to the present living teacher. In the Zen monasteries of Japan this lineage of transmission is still recited daily. The historian’s research raises the question of how that transmission is now to be understood; or put more broadly, it raises the question of the meaning of history for Buddhism.  

Historical research poses the problem regarding the meaning of history not only for Buddhism but also for other religious traditions. Talking about lineage, we also find its notion of creation in Christianity (Mathew 1:1-17; Luke 3:23-38) and Islam (Koran). It is obvious that historians do not accept the historicity of those lineages as “fact.”

CONCLUSION

It is not easy to fairly evaluate the historicity of the lineage of Ch’an and Zen, or is it easy to precisely judge what kinds of effects historical research can have on Ch’an and Zen. This kind of study has not been extensively taken up yet, for instance, in Japan where most Zen studies are taking place, and the sectarian schools of Zen do not seem interested in historical study of this kind. It is also difficult to predict things, especially without understanding precisely what is actually going on in the present circles of all Ch’an and Zen. One understanding of lineage we can have in this light might be that the transmission has “mythically” taken place beyond and within actual history. The lineage at the early

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16 There are other kinds of questions and problems, which arise when the figures of Jesus and Muhammad are analyzed and interpreted in terms of historical research, especially on the miraculous accounts.
stage was therefore formed in a realm of “myth” in which the message had been handed down from the “Truth” (through the “Seven Buddhas of the Past” and “Twenty-eight Indian Patriarchs”). Myth may not be “Fact” in a historical sense but “Truth” in a symbolically religious sense to followers or believers, thereby being “true” and “real” to them.\(^{17}\)

Talking about attaining enlightenment in Ch’an and Zen, one should not rely on words or letters in an ultimate sense. One has only to realize one’s true nature as it is. Historical research and the claim of historians that Ch’an and Zen have made up their lineage for legitimacy may affect Ch’an and Zen to some extent. Though Bodhidharma did not intend, we can assume, to establish the lineage as later schools have created, he proclaimed that the profound teaching had to be transmitted directly from master to disciple. The lineage was created later, but the message or teaching of Ch’an and Zen has been spread and handed down in history through the direct transmission of mind to mind from teacher to disciple or Patriarch to Patriarch. Lineage has indeed played an important role. Though facing the problem or question of lineage as a creation, an individual follower is able to become free from “sectarianism” or “particularity” while being in sectarianism as one realizes and reaches the “universality” of the core teaching—enlightenment, thereby being able to simultaneously objectify and accept the formality of symbolically invented lineage.

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\(^{17}\) In a future article I will discuss the meaning and role of “myth” as seen in the Pure Land school of Buddhism with regard to Dharmakara in the Larger Sutra.


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