

THE FORM OF NO-FORM: RECONSTRUCTING HUINENG IN TWO PAINTINGS

BY LIANG KAI

by

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THESIS ABSTRACT

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The authenticity and interpretation of two *Sixth Patriarch* paintings, traditionally attributed to Liang Kai, have long been debated by critical scholars. Because of the lack of inscriptions on the paintings to indicate the identity of the depicted figure, the association of him with the Sixth Patriarch of Zen Buddhism, Huineng, has shed much enigmatic light onto the decipherment of these two paintings' motifs. While historical and literal traditions of Huineng in Zen Buddhism provide no conspicuous references, Zen's art tradition, on the other hand, provides a more fascinating reading of the *Sixth Patriarch* paintings by formulating and reconstructing a paradigmatic figure of Huineng and Zen romanticism without restricting itself to historical and literal accuracy.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

In Zen Buddhism, visual depictions including paintings and sculptures of famous Zen masters and monks have contributed to the formulation of hagiographical legends within the various Dharma lineages.¹ These portraits and narratives enunciate and amplify themes of religious tradition, where historical accuracy is seemingly a less important concern. These visual treasures not only incorporate legends from various accounts and auxiliary interpretations as motifs, but also profoundly perpetuate the nuclear teachings of *dhyana* (original Sanskrit for meditation, Chan 禪 in Chinese and Zen 禪 in Japanese), which echo throughout the spiritual practice based on legendized paradigms.²

Unlike so many motifs that are notable to the masses, due to the significantly scant amount of visual depictions of Huineng (慧能, or Dajian Huineng 大鑿慧能, 638–713 AD), the Sixth Patriarch of Chan Buddhism, studies about visual depictions of him, or those attributed to him, have not been prolific. In contrast, scholarships about Huineng and the Southern School of Chan (南宗 *nanzong*) affiliated with him are comparatively abundant due to the historical interest in the sudden-gradual debate.³ Such unproportional

¹ Helmut Brinker's *Zen Masters of Meditation in Images and Writings* and Yukio Lippit's *The Zen Portrait in Medieval Japan* discussed extensively the tradition of depicting famous Zen monks in the context of spiritual inspiration, Dharma lineage, and testimonies of enlightenment within Zen Buddhism.

² The word *chan* is the Chinese pronunciation for the Sanskrit word *dyana*; when Chan Buddhism was transmitted to Japan, *zen* became the corresponding word to pronounce the Chinese character *chan*. In this paper, *chan* is used to specify the Chinese school of *dyana* and the Zen Japanese school. Zen Buddhism and Zen doctrines, etc. will be used to describe the Buddhist school and the Buddhist idea as a whole.

³ John R. McRae's *The Northern School and the Formation of Early Ch'an Buddhism* presents a sectarian debate between the Southern School and Northern School (北宗 *beizong*) regarding philosophical concerns over gradual teachings (漸悟 *jianwu*) in comparison with sudden enlightenments. While most of the

representation and perusal in the study of art has, inevitably, created an unassuming presentation of the Chan master, whose historical and religious eminence equate with Bodhidharma (菩提達摩 Puti Damo, 483–540 AD).⁴ Especially, Huineng’s teachings of the Mahayana philosophy on Emptiness (空 *kong*) and its nature (空性 *kongxing*) were some of the most revolutionary claims that defined many subsequent Zen teachings, or were “a bomb” as D. T. Suzuki described it.⁵ The substantial historical and religious scrutiny on the Zen lineage pertaining to the debate between the sudden and gradual schools and the respective legitimacy of patriarchic succession have shaded the visual scholarship and created an imbalanced analogy of Huineng by subsequent generations.⁶

Predominantly, investigations of historical facts present unprejudiced perspectives about Huineng and the Dharma lineage of Zen patriarchs. To scholarships that utilize this approach of inquiring history, such as John McRae’s critical view into the disputes between the Northern and Southern schools (南北宗 *nanbei zong*) regarding gradual and sudden (漸頓 *jian dun*) teachings, factual investigations are an inevitable end that we all

Chan/Zen religious orthodoxy is rooted in the sudden teachings, McRae approaches the same metaphysical concern through the perspective of the gradual school, which was once a frontrunner of orthodox Chan doctrines during the Tang dynasty with its rival the Southern School.

⁴ Suzuki, *The Zen Doctrine of No-Mind* (York Beach: Weiser Books, 1972), p 9. Suzuki describes Huineng as one of the two most important figures in the early history of Chinese Chan Buddhism. The first is, unquestionably, Bodhidharma, who is widely believed among scholars to be the founder of Chan Buddhism in China; the second is Huineng, the Sixth Patriarch, as Suzuki describes him to have “determined the course of Zen.”

⁵ *Ibid.*, p 22. In this book, Suzuki refers to Huineng’s revolutionary ideas as “a bomb.” This claim is made in comparison with the gradual teachings that are represented by the Northern School of Chan, that is, the teachings represented by Shenxiu and his predecessors who advocated diligent spiritual cultivation.

⁶ Philip B. Yampolsky, *The Platform Sutra of the Sixth Patriarch* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1967), p 26–37. One of Huineng’s disciples, Shenhui (神會, 684–758 AD), led the debate over the orthodox lineage of the Chan patriarchs after the Fifth Patriarch, Hungren (弘忍, 601–674 AD). Shenhui claimed the lineage of patriarchy should be represented by the passing down of Bodhidharma’s robe and bowl (衣鉢 *yibo*), and the Sixth Patriarch should be Huineng instead of Shenxiu (神秀, 606–706 AD), who was the contemporary of Huineng in terms of seniority and an advocate of gradual enlightenment, as opposed to Huineng’s sudden enlightenment.

will encounter.⁷ However, merely perusing history through factual events inexorably ignores the historical, philosophical, and religious sentiments affiliated with Huineng and his teachings as proclaimed by his disciples, as well as those paradigmatic virtues that are rendered through these sentiments within the orthodox tradition in the subsequent development of Zen teachings. These sentiments ought to be examined and juxtaposed with events that are considered as fact, as they primarily determined the formation of the tradition and course of development of Zen teachings, which predominantly articulated the history that we perceive today.

⁷ John R. McRae, *Seeing through Zen: Encounter, Transformation, and Genealogy in Chinese Chan Buddhism* (California: University of California Press, 2003), p 1–2. “Many authors have their own favorite ways of characterizing the most essential features of Chan, presenting some short list of features to sum up the entire tradition. . . . The question of how we should look at Chan Buddhism is one we should not attempt to avoid; to simply ignore the issue and begin a recitation of facts and concepts would be to make an unspoken decision, to answer the question by adopting a policy of denial.” McRae, though he emphasizes his status as a Zen practitioner in this book, approaches the study of Zen (Ch.: 禪 *chan*) and Huineng through a critical point of view, as he deems that the avoidance of investigating legends and traditions is to deny the inevitable truth; factual inquiries are ultimately a means to inquisitorial ends that all practitioners will face. McRae wrote extensively about the historical and doctrinal concerns of the Northern School and its association with its precursor, the East Mountain (東山 *Dongshan*) lineage, as well as the Southern School (南宗 *nanzong*). In this book, he divides Chinese Chan into four historical phases: Proto (Bodhidharma and Huike, the Second Patriarch, ca. 500–600), early (Hongren, the Fifth Patriarch, to Shenhui and his contemporaries, ca. 600–900), middle (Mazu, Shitou, Linji, etc.; a period when “encounter dialogue” was the primary mode of practice and discourse, ca. 750–1000), and the Song Dynasty (Dahui, Hongzhi, Five Houses, Linji, and Caodong schools, ca. 950–1300). Although he surveyed the doctrinal evolution, McRae placed much emphasis on the transition from the East Mountain to the Northern Teachings exemplified by the *Lankavatara Sutra*, then the Southern School represented by the *Vajracchedia Sutra*. Concerning the formation between doctrinal polarities in Zen Buddhism, especially the gradual and sudden teachings of the Northern and Southern schools, he writes, “The frequency of dualistic formulations is striking (p 40)” in comparison with the supposed non-dualistic Zen canon. Therefore, McRae counters the religious predilection in Zen tradition after Huineng by preaching the sudden teaching as orthodoxy with much more analysis on the Northern School and its formation in *The Northern School and the Formation of Early Ch’an Buddhism*. To recapitulate the primary issues, McRae confronts the post-Huineng religious conventions and traditions by stating: “The whole point of the narrative [in the *Platform Sutra*], in fact, is to validate Shen-hui’s claim about Huineng without reference to Shen-hui himself. That is, the *Platform Sutra* wished to adopt and build upon Shen-hui’s teachings without identifying itself with his sometimes acrimonious and self-serving campaign [against Shenxiu and his Northern School teachings]. (*Northern School Formation Chan Buddhism*, p 3).” Much could be discussed about McRae’s perspectives of the sectarian campaign launched by the Southern School under the command of Shenhui, as well as the validity of the historical facts about Shenxiu and Huineng. However, this critical perspective is cited deliberately so as to compare it with D. T. Suzuki’s sympathetic approach of viewing Huineng and the Zen tradition associated with him, as this paper does not lean towards either a critical or sympathetic view of Huineng, but rather provides a “third-party” perspective towards the understanding of Huineng and the Zen teachings derived from him.

To understand Huineng through an unfamiliar perspective, we have to understand that religious devotees rarely sought to comprehend history through mere material facts while disregarding spiritual mysteries, as is demonstrated throughout the incessant formation and perpetuation of myths and legends within these religious traditions. The most pivotal ideas of religious beliefs and spiritual cultivation are, often, the articulated elaboration, interpretation, and stimulation that would potentially be useful throughout the process of meditation and ultimately, a meritorious investment of spiritual virtue towards enlightenment. For example, the legend of Bodhidharma crossing the Yangtze river on a reed has been one of the most popular and persistent motifs in Zen religious iconography,⁸ as this perpetuated iconography has been enthusiastically recited over the centuries by Zen Buddhists. The imagery and religious symbols embedded within it operate as a profound paradigm by constantly evoking iconography and spirituality that can be traced back to the historical Buddha.⁹

In the case of the two *Patriarch* paintings (祖師圖 *zushitu*) by the Song Dynasty painter Liang Kai (梁楷, 1140–1210 AD), elaborating upon legends and evoking imaginative interpretations of this famous historical figure from Zen Buddhism have been attributed as his primary subject matter. Traditionally attributed to Liang Kai, *The Sixth Patriarch Cutting the Bamboo* (六祖截竹圖 *Liuzu Jiezhū Tu*, fig. 1. See Appendix A for all figures) and *The Sixth Patriarch Tearing a Sutra* (六祖撕經圖 *Liuzu Sijing Tu*, fig. 2)

⁸ Charles Lachman, “Why Did The Patriarch Cross The River? The Rushleaf Bodhidharma Reconsidered,” in *Asia Major* 6, Third Series, no. 2 (1993), p 237. This article examined the iconographical significance of the famous Bodhidharma crossing the Yangtze river motif in the Zen tradition.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p 266.

portray an elderly figure in a half-squatting position chopping a stalk of bamboo and in the vehement motion of tearing a sutra, respectively.

Due to the lack of writing on the paintings to confirm the identity of the figure, and even more importantly, the inscriptions that normally would be present to indicate the contextual provenances, the two *Sixth Patriarch* paintings have shed an enigmatic light that is worth investigating. The goal of this thesis is to confront these issues to better the understanding of motifs and their paradigmatic religious symbolism. A few genres of questions will be considered as guidelines to carry out these investigations: historical, visual, and philosophical. Since the paintings portray an elderly man who has yet to take tonsure, historical inquiries such as Huineng's lay identity and its importance in Zen tradition will be investigated. Second, visual symbolism, such as the lay presentation of the figure in these paintings, will be examined. Because there are no literal references on the painting, how do these two paintings present ideas that led the subsequent Japanese audience to identify the figure as Huineng?¹⁰ Third, the visual presentation of Zen Buddhist teachings and Huineng's metaphysical ideas in the religious traditions will be investigated. Does the tearing of a sutra refer retrospectively to Bodhidharma's quote on the non-establishment of words (不立文字 *buli wenzi*)? These inquiries not only contribute to the contextual interpretation of the figure in these two paintings as Huineng, but ultimately, provide a glance into the legendized attributes, creative imaginings, and interpretation of famous sages in Zen Buddhism.

¹⁰ Jan Fontein and Money L. Hickman, *Zen Painting & Calligraphy: An Exhibition of Works of Art Lent by Temples, Private Collectors, and Public and Private Museums in Japan, Organized in Collaboration with the Agency for Cultural Affairs of the Japanese Government* (Boston Greenwich, Conn.: Museum of Fine Arts; distributed by New York Graphic Society, 1971), p 15–9. In this catalogue, the interpretation of the figure as Huineng did not appear until the sixteenth century.

LEGENDARY BIOGRAPHY OF HUINENG

The historical biography of Huineng is largely unknown. In fact, Yampolsky described the biography of Huineng as “we have no facts, yet later history records his life in much detail.”¹¹ However, the Zen tradition has placed much emphasis on the *Platform Sutra* and constantly refers to it as a means to Huineng’s orthodoxy as the Sixth Patriarch. In this section, we will not discuss or contribute further to the discourse of critically deciphering the authenticity of Huineng as a historical figure since much of the Zen tradition, at least from the time when the two *Sixth Patriarch* paintings were created until the time when the figure was recognized as Huineng, relies on it as part of its religious tradition. However, in order to understand how such a traditional understanding of Huineng has contributed to the interpretation of the *Sixth Patriarch* paintings, it is pivotal to have an overview of how this tradition has depicted Huineng, primarily in the *Platform Sutra* (壇經 *Tan Jing*).

Within the Zen canon, official teachings of the Sixth Patriarch are recorded in his *Platform Sutra*. It is comprised of two major sections concerning two phases of Huineng’s life: the initial section records his biography from the time of his birth until he took tonsure, and the latter section is concerned with the time from when he took tonsure until his death and includes his sermons to various devotees. Although the *Platform Sutra* is predominantly devoted to the latter section, the initiatory portion will be used here since the figure in Liang Kai’s paintings is displayed as yet to have taken tonsure.

¹¹ Yampolsky, *The Platform Sutra of the Sixth Patriarch*, p 59. Stories, or even subsequent detailed accounts of Huineng, did not emerge until Shenhui, who claimed to be one of Huineng’s disciples and started attacking Shenxiu’s Northern School.

Huineng was born in Xin Zhou, Ling Nan (嶺南新州, in present-day Guangdong 廣東 Province) after his father was exiled from Fan Yang (范陽, present-day Zhouzhou Prefecture 涿州, Hubei Province 河北省). Because his father died when Huineng was still young, Huineng and his mother's livelihood depended on him collecting firewood to sell at the city market. On one occasion, when Huineng was selling firewood at the lodging house for officials, he incidentally heard the recitation of the *Diamond Sutra* and his mind became clear and he suddenly awakened.¹² Out of curiosity, he asked the name of the sutra and provenance of it. The patron, through whom Huineng heard the recitation of the *Diamond Sutra*, told him he received it from the Fifth Patriarch, Hongren (弘忍, 601–74 AD), at the monastery in Huangmei Prefecture (黃梅縣 in present-day Hubei Province 湖北省).¹³ After collecting money to settle his mother, he traveled to Huangmei Mountain to seek the teaching of the Buddha.

When Hongren saw this young man, he asked him who he was and what he sought. After explaining who he was and the intention of his visit, the patriarch replied: “If you're from Ling-nan then you're a barbarian. How can you become a Buddha?”¹⁴

Huineng replied: “Although people from the south and people from the north differ, there is no north and south in Buddha nature. Although my barbarian's body and your body are not the same, what difference is there in our Buddha nature?”¹⁵ Being

¹² Yampolsky, *The Platform Sutra of the Sixth Patriarch*, p 58–9. There are no records in the *Platform Sutra* of which passage or verse Huineng heard on this occasion that contributed to his awakening.

¹³ The usage of “layman” here is to distinguish his social status prior to his official tonsure in a generic fashion. It does not, however, specifically signify a spiritual status.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 127.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 127–8.

incredulous at the ingenious answer, Hongren admitted him into the temple and sent him to the kitchen to grind rice.

A few months passed, and the elderly master sought to select a disciple to transmit the dharma to. He asked his disciples to compose a poem in order to demonstrate their readiness and the progress of their state of awakening. His most preeminent disciple, Yuquan Shenxiu (玉泉神秀, ca. 606–706), wrote a verse on the central section of the south corridor at midnight to avoid attention:

The body is the Bodhi tree,
The mind is like a clear mirror.
At all times we must strive to polish it,
And must not let the dust collect.¹⁶

After hearing the verse, the illiterate Huineng asked a fellow monk in the temple to write down his verse, which juxtaposed Shenxiu's poem:

Bodhi originally has no tree,
The mirror also has no stand.
Buddha nature is always clean and pure;
Where is there room for dust?¹⁷

Upon hearing the verse, the master wiped it off with his shoe and knocked on Huineng's head three times and told everyone: "This is still not complete understanding."¹⁸ In the middle of the night, Huineng went to Hongren's room. The three knocks were a profound notice asking Huineng to arrive at his room at three *geng* (ca. 11 p.m.–1 a.m.). In the room, Hongren explained the whole *Diamond Sutra* and passed on the rope of Bodhidharma to Huineng. In an effort to avoid men of evil intent, he went

¹⁶ Ibid., 130.

¹⁷ Ibid., 132. This verse was translated from the Dunhuang text, which is different from the subsequent version of the poem “菩提本無樹，明鏡亦非臺。本來無一物，何處惹塵埃？”

¹⁸ Ibid.

into hiding somewhere near the border between Sihui (四會) and Huaiji (懷集).¹⁹ Note that in various records, the length of Huineng taking refuge in the woods differs from five to seventeen years.²⁰ However, what is certain is that Huineng spent years in the south before he eventually emerged in public. During this time, the Sixth Patriarch lived among hunters.²¹

During the years of evading the enemies who sought to persecute him, Huineng spent his daily life with hunters and continued his secular life while preaching the teachings of the Buddha among laymen. When the hiding was over, Huineng went to Faxing Temple in Guangzhou (法性寺, present-day Guangxiao Temple 光孝寺), where the famous banner anecdote occurred. Upon his arrival, the abbot of the temple, Yinzong 印宗, was lecturing on the *Nirvana Sutra* (涅槃經). While the abbot's disciples were debating whether the banner was moving or the wind was blowing, Huineng stepped forward and said: "The heart is moving." The abbot was amazed by the sudden visitor and his intelligence. After asking his identity, Huineng was officially ordained a monk.²²

¹⁹ Both Sihui City and Huaiji Prefecture are in the western region of present-day Guangdong Province 廣東省.

²⁰ Yampolsky, *Platform Sutra*, p 73. In the *Sōkei daishi betsuden*, the recorded time of hiding is five years; Tang Dynasty poets claim it to be sixteen years, while the *Lidai Fabao Ji* states that it is seventeen years.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid., 1–88; 125–34.

CHAPTER II

HISTORY OF THE PAINTINGS

Both paintings are inscribed with the signature of Liang Kai, as well the *Dōyū* seal of their initial Japanese collector, Shōgun Ashikaga Yoshimitsu (足利義満, 1358–1408 AD).²³ These collected pieces, however, are not mentioned in the *Gyomotsu on-e mokuroku* (御物御絵目録 comp. ca. 1500), a catalogue that records the shōgunal collections; scholars suspect these two paintings may have been handed down to different collectors respectively before the catalogue was compiled.²⁴ Subsequently, the *Chopping the Bamboo* painting was in the Sakai Collection and eventually the Tokyo National Museum, whereas the *Tearing a Sutra* painting was in the Collection of Mitsui Takanaru in Kyoto. While *Chopping the Bamboo* has been identified as an authentic painting by Liang Kai, Sirén and other scholars have suggested *Tearing a Sutra* could be a Japanese copy of a lost original painting by Liang Kai due to the drastic change in artistic style as well as the state of preservation.²⁵

The Sixth Patriarch Cutting the Bamboo's protagonist occupies the lower central portion of the painting. The depicted view is lateral, and the figure's facial features are not explicitly portrayed. An elderly man is crouched down while raising the firewood chopper in his right hand. His left arm is extended to steady a stalk of bamboo while pulling it towards him, as the bamboo appears to bend gently towards the figure. The

²³ Fontein and Hickman, *Zen Painting & Calligraphy*, p 16–7.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Osvald Sirén, *Chinese Painting*, vol. II (New York: Hacker Art Books Inc., 1973), p 135–6.

brush strokes are evenly thickened, which expresses a rather “hesitated” brush style, as the character seems to be in a moment of measuring, scrutinizing, or even contemplating before he strikes the bamboo stalk.

In contrast, the brush strokes of *The Sixth Patriarch Tearing a Sutra* are extremely incisive. The thickened beginnings to the slender and eventually fading ends of the strokes look thrust onto the surface of the painting. The kinetic direction of the strokes and lightning-like quality of lines amplify the agitated motion of tearing,²⁶ as the figure is depicted ruthlessly tearing a piece of paper with illegible writing on it while the remnant scroll, which the paper may have originally been ripped off of, is lying on the floor in front of the figure. Though depicted from the lateral view as well, the elderly man is portrayed with his mouth slightly opened and appears to be frowning.

Noticeable contrasts are not only visible with the brush strokes, which as most scholars have suggested are of artistic technicality, but also the figure within these two paintings. The figure in *Chopping the Bamboo* is depicted wearing a shirt with his sleeves rolled up, as the crease at the edges of the shoulders suggests. The protagonist has extensive cloth hanging from the back of his head to imply a hair-bun. The light shadow on the right arm, the body of the bamboo, as well as the tree trunk in the background suggest a sense of scale, and all are depicted using light ink that displays gradation and contrast. The *Tearing a Sutra* painting, on the contrary, has no obvious use of light ink that suggests similar technical application. The figure has his sleeves comparatively loosened and rolled up slightly above his wrists. One of the most distinct differences is the depiction of the hair-bun. It is portrayed here with darker strokes without the

²⁶ Sylvan Barnet and William Burton, *Zen Ink Paintings: Great Japanese Art* (Tokyo: Kodansha International Ltd., 1982), p 36.

extensive cloth that would otherwise be used to tie the bun. The altered portrayal of the figure suggests an interpretive imitation of an authentic counterpart.²⁷

Scholarships concerning these two paintings have repetitively stated an ambiguous identification and interpretation: there is no explicit inscription on the painting to indicate the identity of the depicted figure to be Huineng, nor can the events illustrated be referenced directly to historical and literal records of Huineng; however, there are legendary accounts in Huineng's biography that support these paintings. For example, *Suiboku bijutsu taikai*, by Kawakami Kei and Toda Teisuke, has given a traditional explanation of *The Sixth Patriarch Cutting the Bamboo*, stating that the famous Zen patriarch was awoken upon hearing the sound of striking the bamboo. However, how such an interpretation came about has never been fully examined. Regarding the *The Sixth Patriarch Tearing the Sutra*, there are no records of corresponding events in the *Platform Sutra*.²⁸ In the Boston catalogue *Zen Painting & Calligraphy*, Fontein and Hickman stated that the figure described in these two paintings as Huineng is a Japanese interpretation. In fact, there are no indications that the figure was meant to be Huineng or persuade Zen philosophies when they were painted. Although there are no obvious historical and legendary episodes in Huineng's biography that directly suggest the scene, there are good reasons to relate the painting with the Sixth Patriarch: his illiteracy and the story of him awakening when incidentally hearing the

²⁷ The original *Tearing a Sutra* painting and *Chopping the Bamboo* are a diptych. Since the latter painting and the copied one both contain the *Dōyū* seal, it is reasonable to infer the original *Tearing a Sutra* was lost before both of them were passed down to different collectors. However, the stylistic difference mentioned by other scholars not only suggests, as previously mentioned, one of them is a Japanese copy, but also implies the *Tearing a Sutra* was created in the absence of the original one, perhaps based on its extant twin *Chopping the Bamboo* and the collector's impression of the late painting he used to possess.

²⁸ Kawakami Kei 川上徑, Toda Teisuke 戸田禎佑 and Ebine Toshio 海老根聰郎, *Suiboku bijutsu taikai*, Vol. IV 水墨美術大系 (4), *Ryōkai Indara* 梁楷 因陀羅 (Tokyo: Kodansha, 1975), p 151–2.

Vajracchedikā-sūtra, or the *Diamond Sutra*.²⁹ Although listing the various possible biographical episodes of Huineng could have been used to decipher the iconography of the painting, such as the incident in the *Platform Sutra* where Huineng was depicted to be illiterate but was able to demonstrate his state of awakening by composing a poem (which will be examined in this thesis), further explanation as to how these events specifically resonate with the motif is not given in *Zen Painting & Calligraphy. Liang K'ai*, a catalogue of paintings by Liang Kai published by the Institute of Art Research Tokyo. Without much interpretation of the paintings' iconography or symbolism, it takes a much-reserved approach by introducing Liang Kai's paintings as having been transmitted to Japan alongside paintings of other famous painters, such as Mu Chi. It does not incorporate much artistic decipherment in comparison with, for example, the Boston catalogue and *Suiboku bijutsu taikai*.³⁰ In Barnet and Burto's *Zen Ink Paintings, the Tearing a Sutra*, while displaying no obvious literal connection with the stories of Huineng, does resonate with Huineng as an exemplifier of an illiterate person, who typifies the idea that "enlightenment was passed on directly from mind to mind rather than through the sutras," which is conveniently depicted in this painting.³¹ However, the question of what it means to be illiterate in a Zen context (in the case of Huineng) will be further investigated in the discourse of this paper. Overall, current scholarships on these two paintings that purport to depict Huineng follow an array of ambiguous interpretations without further perusing religious literature or the historical and religious sentiments of Huineng that may have affected such interpretations.

²⁹ Fontein and Hickman, *Zen Painting & Calligraphy*, p 19.

³⁰ *Ryō Kai* (Kyoto: Benrido Co., Ltd, 1957), p 5–7.

³¹ Barnet and Burton, *Zen Ink Paintings*, p 36.

While these two paintings have historically been recognized as a pair, scholarships rarely analyze them in such a manner. For example, many extant writings about these two paintings are respective interpretations, or simply insert an interpretation of one while mentioning the other in passing, sometimes even disregarding the other altogether. These two paintings are evidently associated, corresponding and resonating with each other. In juxtaposition, they provide an imaginative retrospect to the legends of Huineng's paradigmatic characteristics: implications to his illiteracy and lay status.

ESOTERIC PEDAGOGY: A SEPARATE TRANSMISSION OUTSIDE THE TEACHINGS

Prior to understanding the profound Zen teachings of Huineng interpreted from these paintings, it is necessary to peruse their role as a visual practice within the larger scheme of Zen art. Zen Buddhism, in comparison with other Buddhist denominations, has often been attributed with peculiar features, such as the study of *koan* (公案, a compilation of esoteric stories, dialogues, questions, and statements, which is used in Zen Buddhism to provoke the state of enlightenment and to test a student's progress by the master) and the non-establishment of words (不立文字, the teaching within Zen Buddhism that wisdom cannot be contained within words, and therefore it does not rely on them solely). The teachings within Zen Buddhism are also often seen to be illogical and sometimes esoteric. Often times, they appear to be confrontational to secular perceptions and challenge conceptuality within Zen teachings. These perplex and illogical messages were often represented on the surface of Zen paintings. Subject matter would function as a means to attest the artist's state of awakening, sometimes conveying a profound Zen pedagogy. In the *Sixth Patriarch* paintings, the figure is in the motion of tearing up a sutra, which directly references the destruction of concepts and sentiment of

iconoclasm towards orthodoxy and the reliance on literary pedagogies. This resonates with Huineng as the heroic paradigm who challenges the conventional understanding of an ideal monk such as Shenxiu. The paintings signify the sheer notion of peculiarity in contrast with popular conventionality and an awakened mind within mundane actions, through which enlightenment could be achieved and manifested.

Before I dive into the decipherment of this art tradition that depicts figures performing unconventional actions, it is important to understand how this tradition is embraced within Zen Buddhism in general, as it somehow formulaically ascribes Zen art. In Zen tradition, the evocation of the true nature could be performed through esoteric and sometimes, peculiar actions. The first known example for such would be the legendary beginning of the idea of Zen. According to the Zen Buddhist tradition, the moment of Zen began on the Vulture Peak near Benares.³² The historical Buddha Sakyamuni, while being asked questions of faith, raised a flower to his chest and was twisting it between his fingers with a quiescent smile. The faithful in front of him were puzzled and bewildered. Only Maha Kasyapa (摩訶迦葉, Mohe Jiaye in Chinese and Maha Kasho in Japanese) understood the Buddha's ultimate wisdom and responded by smiling. This anecdote recorded the first "wordless transmission" according to traditions in Zen Buddhism.³³

The teaching of the non-establishment of words can be traced back to the first Patriarch of Chan Buddhism—Bodhidharma. During his latter days in China, the patriarch prudently passed on the famous four creeds that recapitulate the overall central creed of Zen Buddhism: A separate transmission outside the

³² Helmut Brinker and Hiroshi Kanasawa, *Zen Masters of Meditation in Images and Writings* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1996), 25.

³³ Ibid.

teachings, not setting up words, directly pointing at the human mind, and seeing one's own nature, through which Buddhahood is achieved (translated by Schlutter).³⁴ These four Zen creeds address the essential teachings on the methods for attaining enlightenment. The first creed indicates the special way to transmit the dharma of Zen—an illogical understanding of the master's teaching and the ability to understand and awake outside of the superficial teachings. The second creed is directly rooted in the core of the first creed. In Buddhism, two prevalent methods for approaching spiritual cultivation follow parallel paths towards what is required to obtain enlightenment. One method is “within the teachings,” where devotees rigorously follow the literal decrees and textual pedagogies of the Buddha. The other method is “outside the teachings,” which exemplifies a method where devotees derive themselves from the textual references and literary didactics; this fashion of spiritual cultivation often is characterized by what is called “from mind to mind” (以心傳心)—the indescribable understanding between the master and disciple. Therefore, it is impossible to be utterly comprehended through words. The third creed emphasizes the “from mind to mind” teaching within Zen Buddhism. The illogical within the mind breaks away from the confines of superficial concepts and therefore, can only be apprehended spiritually. The last creed directly results from the ultimate outcome of the previous three creeds. After deriving one's self from rigid circumscriptions, which were induced through the confine of concepts, the person confronts his or her pure heart and true nature to attain Buddhahood.

³⁴ Morten Schlutter, *How Zen Became Zen*, p 14. 教外別傳, 不立文字, 直指人心, 見性成佛

The episode of Bodhidharma evoking the pure mind of his disciple Huike (大祖慧可, Dazu Huike in Chinese and Taiso Eka in Japanese, born in 487 AD and died in 593 AD), who was the exemplifier of Bodhidharma's creed. (He was also one of the principle disciples of Bodhidharma, and was later known as the Second Patriarch of Zen Buddhism.) Huike visited the patriarch when he was facing a wall meditating (fig. 4). He waited for the Indian monk outside of the cave for days and mutilated his left arm to attest his resolve to pursue the "unsurpassable, wondrous path of the Buddhas."³⁵ Finally, Bodhidharma agreed to see him. When Huike saw the patriarch sitting in front of the wall meditating, he asked:

"My mind is not at peace; please pacify it for me."

Bodhidharma replied: "Bring your mind here and I will pacify it for you."

Huike said: "I have searched for my mind, but it is completely unobtainable."

Bodhidharma: "I have (now) completely pacified your mind for you."³⁶

In Sesshu's *Huike Showing his Severed Arm to Bodhidharma*, the patriarch is facing the wall. He is depicted in a white robe and is staring at the wall in front of him. Huike, while standing behind Bodhidharma, is holding his mutilated left arm in the gesture of presenting it to the master. In contrast with the rigorous rendered detail of the cave, the robes of the two bearded monks appear to be glaringly protruding. The thick strokes with light ink appear to correspond with the intense facial expression of Bodhidharma and the detachment of self.³⁷ When Emperor Wu of Liang summoned the Indian monk to inquire about religious merit, Bodhidharma negated such merit. When the

³⁵ John R. McRae, *The Northern School and the Formation of Early Ch'an Buddhism* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1987), 16.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 17.

³⁷ Helmut Brinker, *Zen in the Art of Painting* (London: Penguin Group, 1987), 85–92.

emperor confronted him, saying: “Who are you to judge?” the monk answered: “I don’t know.”

The wordless transmission and the special teachings outside of words were often conveyed through recondite actions. The famous Linji Yixuan (臨濟義玄, or Rinzai Gigen in Japanese, died 866 AD), who was the founder of the Linji or Rinzai School of Zen Buddhism during the Tang Dynasty in China, used martial disposition and sometimes violent acts to knock his disciples out of attachment. Therefore, by the time Rinzai Zen had been transmitted to Japan, it was called “Shogun Zen.”³⁸ The iconoclastic characteristic of Linji Yixuan emphasizes the breaking out from the traps of concepts of any form:

Followers of the Way, if you want insight into dharma as it is, just don’t be taken in by the deluded views of others. Whatever you encounter, either within or without, slay it at once. On meeting a buddha slay the buddha, on meeting a patriarch slay the patriarch, on meeting an arhat slay the arhat, on meeting your parents slay your parents, on meeting your kinsman slay your kinsman, and you attain emancipation. By not cleaving to things, you freely pass through.³⁹

The idea of iconoclasm, with its more specific definition, could be used to describe an act of destroying an icon. However, in Zen Buddhism, such a phrase is often referencing the destruction of anything tangible, such as paintings, icons, and sacred texts. The radical pedagogy on the subject of iconoclasm may appear horrific to some, but the shock-effect was meant to entrench the indubitable trap of attachment—the attachment and reliance on any form of preexisting concept, which led to being effected

³⁸ Ruth Fuller Sasaki, trans., “Foreward” by Yamada Mumon 山田無文 in *The Record of Linji* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2009), VII.

³⁹ Sasaki, *The Record of Linji*, 236. “道流，爾欲得如法見解，但莫受人惑。向裏向外，逢著便殺。逢佛殺佛，逢祖殺祖，逢羅漢殺羅漢，逢父母殺父母，逢親屬殺親屬，始得解脫，不與物拘，透脫自在。”

and unable to escape from the boundary of mind and self.⁴⁰ In another passage in *The Record of Linji*, Linji Yixuan explained the above message and the precise reason for justifying the idea of “slaying the Buddha”:

But you, weren't you born of a mother? If you seek buddha, you'll be held in the grip of Buddha-Mara. If you seek the patriarchs, you'll be bound by the ropes of Patriarch-Mara. If you engage in any seeking, it will all be pain. Much better to do nothing.⁴¹

This passage narrates the nucleus of the previous text. A person born of flesh can be easily trapped into the pre-established thoughts of predecessors. This seemingly radical pedagogy evoked the question of the innate trouble of the human mind, which can be easily manipulated without noticing.

Similarly, the legendary biography of the Sixth Patriarch provides an unorthodoxy regarding the dharma transmission and the conventionally rendered method of obtaining enlightenment by later Zen practitioners. In the beginning of the *Platform Sutra*, Huineng demonstrated the notion of sudden enlightenment of Zen Buddhism. The immediate awakening struck the inherently bright mind upon hearing the recitation of the *Diamond Sutra*, which corresponds with the teaching “from mind to mind.” In contrast, Shenxiu's poem testifies to gradual enlightenment, where a person must cultivate his mind and spirit diligently in order to obtain enlightenment. According to the *Platform Sutra*, Huineng achieved enlightenment long before he was ordained, and even prior to receiving any formal instruction from Hongren; his sudden moment of achieving enlightenment could be directly linked to any unpremeditated trivial incident.

⁴⁰ John R. McRae, *Seeing Through Zen: Encounter, Transformation, and Genealogy in Chinese Chan Buddhism* (California: University of California Press, 2003), 129.

⁴¹ Sasaki, *The Record of Linji*, 223. “爾還是釀生已否。爾若求佛，即被佛魔攝，即被祖魔縛。爾若有求皆苦。不如無事。”

The phenomenon of achieving, demonstrating, and conveying the state of enlightenment is found unremittingly in Zen art. Zen artists eligibly incorporate their understanding of enlightenment—responding to the religious conventions and orthodoxy through iconoclastic actions and sometimes, sacrilegious attitudes towards the confines of existing concepts. One of the most prevalent subject matters within Zen art would be the story of Xianzi 蜆子, also known as the Shrimp Eater (fig. 5). Xianzi was known as one of the “scattered sages” (散聖), whose reputation has always been characterized as unorthodox and peculiar.⁴² The Shrimp Eater was a historical figure; he was the disciple of the Caodong patriarch, Dongshan (807–69 AD). The peculiar monk was known to roam the riverside in order to catch shrimps and clams. This action was forbidden in Buddhism under the dogma of not killing sentient beings. According to legend, Xianzi attained enlightenment while catching a shrimp.⁴³

In Muqi Fachang’s painting, the bare-footed Xianzi is depicted as an elderly monk with no Buddhist rope, but rather a ruffled garment wrapped around his waist. With the basket tied to the back of his waist, his right arm is carrying a bamboo pole with a fishing net, which forms a diagonal line in the lower half of the painting, while his right arm is raised and holding a shrimp, who appears to be dangling and struggling to escape his doomed fate. Looking at the shrimp, Xianzi is depicted satisfactorily laughing. Above the figure, an inscription was made by Yanxi Guangwen:

Picking up his net at random and dragging it through the mud,
Wading across the water, illicit goods emerge before him
He comes face to face with this troublesome taboo
If the offering tray from the altar for the gods is missing,

⁴² Yukio Lippit and Gregory Levine, *Awakenings: Zen Figure Painting in Medieval Japan* (New York: Japan Society, 2007), 120.

⁴³ Brinker, *Zen in the Art of Painting*, 82.

It is because in the end he never cast off the handiwork of demons.⁴⁴

The inscription was meant to provoke the state of spiritual realization by the honorary viewer of the image; the writing in addition to the image often characterize the writer's appreciation of the art and his realization of the profound visual implication.⁴⁵ The passage described the unconstrained attitude towards worldly affairs, and even outlandishly flouted the Buddhist creed against slaying and killing sentient beings.⁴⁶ While emphasizing not falling into the trap of concepts, Xianzi's defiant act created the refluxing current to counter the orthodoxy of the Buddhist dogma of forbidding the killing of any sentient being. This irrespective disposition as a way to demonstrate the eccentricity and the state of enlightenment impresses the viewer of the characteristic madness of the "scattered sages."

Unlike Xianzi, Huineng would not have been on the list of "scattered sages" since he is officially recognized as a patriarch of Zen Buddhism. However, the *Tearing a Sutra* painting presents characteristics, or Zen virtues, that would have been inspiring, and even in alignment with the esoteric actions that challenge conventional perceptions, as in the case of Xianzi, including tearing up the literal pedagogies of Buddha's teachings, the sutra. Just like Xianzi, the *Tearing a Sutra* painting represents a nature of defiance towards orthodox conventions. This would certainly categorize it in the array of scattered sage paintings, not because Huineng is one, but because he confronts the avant-garde

⁴⁴ Lippit, *Awakenings*, 112.

⁴⁵ Brinker, *Zen Masters of Meditation in Images and Writings*, 99.

⁴⁶ Lippit, *Awakenings*, 116.

virtues that are purposely conveyed through such a depiction, as well as the interpretation of a paradigmatic Huineng and his teachings.

The Chan master Tianran from Danxia (丹霞天然) was also an exemplifier of the iconoclastic figures in Zen tradition. His peculiar actions often caused astonishing events that would result in his contemporaneous monks reacting with a type of shocked bewilderment.⁴⁷ Sometimes, he would pretend to be deaf and dumb in order to fool others; one time, he “disrespectfully” climbed a statue of the Buddha.⁴⁸ One of the notable episodes of Tianran would be the famous burning of a statue of the Buddha (fig. 6). On a freezing night, Tianran was staying at Huilinsi. The temperature was so arctic-like that he took the image of the Buddha and burned it to warm himself. The abbot of the temple was shocked and inquired after the reason behind his madness. Tianran responded with an eccentric and conspicuously humoristic answer: he was trying to obtain the relic of the Buddha (*sarira*, *sheli* in Chinese and *shari* in Japanese). The abbot was perplexed: “But how can you get relics from an ordinary piece of wood?” Tianran answered: “If it is nothing more than a piece of wood, why would you upbraid me (for burning it)?”⁴⁹

In Yintuoluo’s painting *Danxia Tianran Burning a Wooden Buddha Image*, the mad monk is shown sitting under a withered tree. He is raising both of his hands to warm himself in front of a cloud of smoke. Tianran is depicted turning back his head and smiling at the abbot, who is holding a staff and pointing at Tianran in a gesture of

⁴⁷ Brinker, *Zen Masters of Meditation in Images and Writings*, 39.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

inquiry. On the left side of the painting, an inscription was made by the renowned Chan priest Chushi Fanqi (楚石梵琦, 1296–1370 AD):

At an old temple, in cold weather, he spent the night.
He could not stand the piercing cold of the whirling wind.
If it has no *sarira*, what is so special about it?
So he took the wooden Buddha from the hall and burned it.⁵⁰

This legendary anecdote of Tianran burning the image of the Buddha evoked scornful anxiety towards attachment to secularity within this religious tradition; this seemingly sporadic iconoclasm contains an underlying provocation of the secular religious tradition of the worship of images. The questioning of what was considered to be orthodox practice within popular culture stupefied the ones who attached themselves within the constraints of the concept of religious dogma and the catering of orthodoxy.⁵¹

As Brinker wrote:

Thus, when Tianran climbs on a cult statue, he only displays, candidly and provocatively, the elimination of awe, his indifference to and his inner independence from the consecrated, holy image. To him, effigies—even those of the Buddha—are ephemeral and ultimately doomed attempts to render visible and tangible the true Buddha Nature, *buddhata*, or to capture it in personal likeness.⁵²

The creed of Bodhidharma accentuated his teachings outside of textual references. In this anecdote, Tianran amplified the concept of “words” into “no reliance on images,” as the secular need of embodying one’s mind to visual form is a way to attach one’s self to the image, and therefore is a “visual” concept of sacredness and religiousness. Tianran exemplified the idea that the meaning of “words” could also reside in “images,” and to

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Ibid.

address the fallible trap that could easily be induced by the devout populace, Tianran chose to confront the problem in an appalling manner; by burning the image, Tianran confronted not only the authentic material nature of the Buddhist images, but also the true nature within one's self.

Like the painting of Danxia Tianran, this iconoclastic anxiety is also addressed in Liang Kai's painting. In *the Sixth Patriarch Tearing the Sutra*, Huineng is depicted in the anxious motion of destroying the textual teachings—a symbolic creed against any kind of attachment and the confinement within words and literary pedagogies. By tearing the sutra, Huineng undoubtedly demonstrates his indifference of the literary text and the finite truth it can convey. The truth behind the tearing of the sutra was more than iconoclasm. By tearing the text, he denounces sole attachment to recordable concepts. However, his own enlightenment was evoked through hearing the recitation of the *Diamond Sutra*. The use of the literary reference, though not attachable, should be facilitated as the expedient means to evoke the true nature of the mind and assist one in achieving enlightenment.

The destruction of the sacred and religious sutra signified the concept that was advocated in the four-line creed of Bodhidharma—the non-establishment of words. The profane acts of killing the buddha, incinerating the images, and tearing apart the sutra correspond with the pure nature of mind—the Buddha nature. In the *Platform Sutra*, Huineng said to his ten disciples before his death:

I shall give you the teaching in the three categories and the thirty-six confrontations of activity. As things rise and sink, you must separate from dualism. When you explain all things, do not stand apart from nature and form. Should someone ask you about the Dharma, what you say should all be symmetrical and you must draw parallels for everything. Since they originate each from the other, if in the end

dualisms are all completely cast aside, there will be no place for them to exist.⁵³

Huineng preached that when one concept rises, the opposite must be raised in order to counteract and avoid the trap of dualism.⁵⁴ Therefore, the attachment of sacredness must be confronted with sacrilege. With profane and peculiar acts in religious settings or in conveying religious messages, the idea of non-dualism would always be induced profoundly.

The Sixth Patriarch Tearing the Sutra presented Huineng in a manner similar to the “scattered sages,” where he is carrying out sacrilegious violence towards the orthodoxy, just as the Shrimp Easter was disregarding the Buddhist dogma. The eccentricity and madness within these conscious actions is often derived from the true nature, without consciously catering to the social norm, and therefore unconsciously subscribing one’s mind to the trap of concepts. Therefore, the presentation of Huineng expresses a method of obtaining enlightenment and the evocation of questions that would challenge the social norm of orthodoxy.

Unlike *Tearing a Sutra, Cutting the Bamboo* persuades a much subtler contemplation upon the viewers through the depicted figure. In a comparative scene, perhaps it resonates much with Song Dynasty painter Zhiweng (直翁 mid-thirteenth century) and his much more conspicuous *The Sixth Patriarch Carrying a Pole* (fig. 7). This painting, in contrast with the *Sixth Patriarch* paintings, has identifiable inscriptions

⁵³ Yampolsky, trans, *The Platform Sutra of the Sixth Patriarch*, 170–1.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

by a Zen abbot to insinuate Huineng's story of accidentally hearing the recitation of the *Diamond Sutra* while he was still a wood collector in his youth:⁵⁵

The shoulders are carrying a full load of burdens,
The road in front of the eyes appears to be indifferent.
The heart that knows “should not abide in an object,”
Knows in whose house the firewood would land.⁵⁶

The incorporated phrase in the inscription “should not abide in an object” is a direct reference from the *Diamond Sutra*'s “should not abide in an object and give rise to thoughts.”⁵⁷ It narrates a kind of transcending attitude of a laborer, whose shoulders are burdened as suggested by the shoulder-pole; in other words, he knows the fundamental teachings of the *Diamond Sutra* and knows where the firewood is to be carried to. Under the inscription that vividly illustrates the story in a form of spiritual romanticism, Huineng is portrayed carrying a pole over his left shoulder while his right hand is dangling and concealed under his prolonged sleeve. Despite the tired bodily gesture that implies the arduousness of a rather recent unloading of firewood, Huineng's expression expositis a moment of immersion in spiritual satisfaction.⁵⁸ It would be better recapitulated with the Buddhist term *faxi chongman* (法喜充滿, which literally means filled with dharma joy), which describes the joy that one obtains in spiritual enlightenment. This scene resonates with the *Cutting the Bamboo* painting. As the prolonged day of mundane labor seems to be arduous and tiring, the enlightened mind is

⁵⁵ Yukio Lippit, “Apparition Painting,” in *RES: Anthropology and Aesthetics*, no. 55/56 (Spring–Autumn, 2009), p 62–3.

⁵⁶ Original inscription in Chinese: “擔子全肩荷負，目前歸路無差，心知應無所住，知柴落在誰家。”

⁵⁷ The incorporated phrase in the inscription “應無所住” is referenced directly from the *Diamond Sutra*'s “應無所住而生其心。”

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

put in practice through laborious works. Without much stimulating action, the visual pedagogy within the *Carrying a Pole* and *Cutting the Bamboo* paintings is directing the mind towards spiritual realization. If *Tearing a Sutra* is in alignment with the “scattered sages” themes, then the figure in *Cutting the Bamboo* is situated with a pedagogical but much contemplative mind.

The evocation of awakening through action can be seen through the legendary episode of Sakyamuni picking the flower. The pure nature of the flower lured the inner Buddha within the heart; therefore, the understanding of the world and peace within the mind can be seen in trivial things and actions such as picking the flower and catching a shrimp. There were occasions when these deeds would be rendered profane and provocative to larger society. Therefore, irrationality and peculiarity, which were popularly deemed as troublesome, became ways to invert the stubborn blindness within the mind.

Liang Kai presented a figure of virtue that evokes an inspiring sentiment in line with the Sixth Patriarch’s teachings by conveying a state of enlightenment through action. As attested by the anecdote of Sakyamuni picking the flower, the motion of the figure in Liang Kai’s paintings demonstrates a certain degree of spiritual awareness and the state of awakening. Such an action was rendered in a fashion that is similar to the drastic and radical iconoclast of Tianran. The defiant and profane tearing of the sutra provoked opposition to the Buddhist orthodoxy and the religious convention that was prevalently pervasive among devotees. As Lijin Yixuan explained, any sort of ideas would become a trap of the mind; any concepts would beget attachment so therefore, kill whatever is in your path. By tearing the sutra, Huineng demonstrates the indifferent

attitude towards the supposed religious practice where the literary teachings of the Buddha occupied a crucial position in the minds of the disciples. The destruction of the sutra directly led to the return of nativity of Zen Buddhism: a separate transmission outside of teachings, not setting up words, directly pointing at the human mind, and seeing one's own nature, through which Buddhahood is achieved. Regardless of the two drastic interpretations and depictions of the figure—one a spiritual paradigm of a contemplative mind, and one a scattered sage-like patriarch of defiance of conventions and concepts, both convey understandings and sentiments towards the Sixth Patriarch, not in a fashion of exclusion, but rather inter-complementary decipherment of Huineng and the teachings he left as a legacy of enlightenment.

HUINENG'S ZEN IN LIANG KAI

Until Huineng, Zen transmission was primarily constricted to a single lineage pattern. After Huineng, transmission no longer followed a single lineage pattern, but rather a multi-lineage pattern. In the Song Dynasty, the era in which Liang Kai was active, the transmission of Huineng's Zen branched into various traditions. Despite the various branches and their different approaches to Huineng's lineage, they all claimed to be legitimate successors of his teachings.⁵⁹

The transmissions and spiritual practices remained primarily within the Zen creed created by the Bodhidharma. It is within these pivotal creeds that art incorporating Zen teachings remained fundamentally aligned not only with Bodhidharma's, but also Huineng's teachings, despite the branching of Zen traditions, although Zen art such as Liang Kai's *Sixth Patriarch* paintings convey meanings outside of conceptualized verbal

⁵⁹ Morten Schlutter, *How Zen Became Zen: The Dispute Over Enlightenment and the Formation of Chan Buddhism in Song-Dynasty China* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2010), p 14.

transmissions of teachings. Zen paintings, or art in general proliferated as one of the most prevalent artistic genres in the Song Dynasty due to the philosophical and sentimental predilection of the literati; this explains the cloistered tendency of many famous Buddhist monks, such as Niaoke (鳥窠), who chose to meditate on top of a tree rather than in a monastic setting. This sort of reclusive disposition became extremely prevalent; intellectuals such as Sushi (蘇軾) of the Northern Song gave up their posts in favor of a secluded life in mountainous areas or Chan monasteries.⁶⁰ Because of the religious and cultural infusion in the social atmosphere, the tendency of yearning for seclusion in the mountains or suburban locations was embedded in early Chinese creative works. Occasionally, literati in the court would give up their promising positions in favor of a spiritual life in Chan monasteries. This sort of phenomenon became the prevalent sentimental-romanticism of the literati of the time, such as Liang Kai's retreat to a Zen monastery after abandoning his official appointment as a court painter.

The *Cutting the Bamboo* and *Tearing a Sutra* paintings are exemplifiers of Liang Kai's later work, in contrast with his earlier paintings when he was serving in the court. The notable artistic techniques and visual renderings are rather conspicuously different between the two distinctive stages of Liang Kai's works. Especially, in the rendering of brush strokes, application of vivid color in his early works and the scrupulous image rendering of the figure contrast his later predilection to favor the *baimiao* (白描, line drawings without filling in extraneous shades and lack of color) and *jiangbi* (簡筆,

⁶⁰ Yamei Yan 嚴雅美, *Study of the Immortal in Splashed Ink – Concurrently Discuss The Paintings of Chan Buddhism in the Song and Yuan Dynasties 潑墨仙人圖研究 – 兼論宋元禪宗繪畫* (Taipei: Dharma Drum Culture, 2000), pp. 129–45.

abbreviated strokes). The latter two simply illustrate the motifs through explicit and rapid strokes without the elaborate decoration of colors.

Shakyamuni Descending from the Mountain (fig. 3) was among Liang Kai's most representative paintings during his early life as an imperial painter. The subject matter of Shakyamuni walking out from the mountains after failing to achieve enlightenment was one of the favorite iconographies within Buddhist paintings. In this painting, Shakyamuni appears to be enervated from the prolonged period of austere and ascetic meditation in the mountain. The color contrast of Shakyamuni and the background provides a kind of hierarchical implication of the most central figure, which was painted with vivid colors. The mountainous surrounding impresses viewers with visual vapidness. The comprehensive composition is a typical Song Dynasty diagonal view, where the center area is often directed with a diagonal line of a depicted object. According to the various sutras concerning Shakyamuni's life, he went into the mountains for six years in order to cultivate his meditation of austerity but failed. After his abortion of achieving enlightenment, Shakyamuni realized that ascetic meditation does not suffice in becoming enlightened, and he re-entered the non-ascetic world. However, there is no explicit literary account of Shakyamuni descending from the mountain path; this pictorial depiction is only found within the Zen tradition.⁶¹ Representation of the descent is always of a withered monk coming out from the mountain; this visual representation typifies the failure to achieve enlightenment after an extended period of ascetic meditation.⁶²

Despite the expressive visual contrast, the underlying metaphor between *Shakyamuni Descending the Mountain* and *Sixth Patriarch* paintings implies a profound

⁶¹ Gregory Levine and Yukio Lippit, *Awakenings: Zen Figure Paintings in Medieval Japan* (New York: Japan Society, 2007), pp. 42.

⁶² Ibid.

sentimental agreement of Liang Kai's understanding and the essential teachings of Huineng's Zen teachings during the Song Dynasty. As Shakyamuni walks out from the mountainous path, his haggard features represent the despondency of the long ascetic meditation without achieving enlightenment. The resigned Shakyamuni became the visual fustigation of the diligent spiritual cultivation versus Liang Kai's endorsement of Huineng's sudden enlightenment, which was a more appealing approach to gain enlightenment in the Chan communities during the Song Dynasty.

As Liang Kai furthered his study of Zen after his retreat to a Chan monastery, his later work would comprehensively resent the careful rendering of brush strokes and therefore, he ceased to typify himself with the visual predilection of the court. The *Shakyamuni Descending the Mountain* renders an emotion that, as the Buddha walks down from the path of asceticism, Liang Kai embraces after spiritual culmination from secular fame, which marks the transition from his earlier court-style to the subsequent *jianbi*. The result that arrived in the *Sixth Patriarch* paintings corresponds with Liang Kai's secular status and somewhat resonates with Huineng, as Liang Kai never officially took tonsure and remained a lay Buddhist within the Chan monastery, which could have evoked the imaginative interpretation of why he painted the figure in the *Sixth Patriarch* paintings as Huineng. His abandonment of the prestigious position of an imperial painter imitates Huineng's legacy of laity; his transition from elaborate court paintings to an austere style mirrors Huineng's illiteracy, which goes against the definition of an ideal monk.

CHAPTER III

THE LAY HUINENG AND LABOR AS PRACTICE

As previously mentioned, the inferences of Huineng's identity in Liang Kai's paintings are largely related to the motifs of awakening during mundane activities, and the significance of the action of tearing a sutra could be extracted from legends of Huineng related to his illiteracy. However, questions regarding the specificity of what mundane activities signify in legends of Huineng and their significance in a Zen context at large, as well as the profound implication of representing Huineng's illiteracy are going to be examined. These perusals will ultimately present Huineng as a type of *avant-garde* spiritual manifestation as well as a paradigm, in contrast with his counterpart Shenxiu (神秀, 606–706 AD), in order to solidify the notion of instantaneous awakening through labor, which can be referenced back to the Sixth Patriarch's biography. Indeed, there are records in the Zen tradition of Huineng that support this since the legendary anecdotes of the famous Sixth Patriarch are as equally notable as the teachings he purported.⁶³ Therefore, it is crucial to understand the factors behind Huineng's laity and illiteracy that led Japanese collectors to interpret the figure in Liang Kai's paintings to be Huineng.

There are primarily three different stages in Huineng's earlier life before he eventually took tonsure. Any of these three stages could have been the inspiration behind his labor, or at least the idea of becoming awakened upon striking the bamboo, as

⁶³ McRae, *Seeing through Zen*, p 68–9. McRae interpreted the lay status of Huineng to be a sage-like paradigm within Zen tradition, which he describes as “apparently iconoclastic, only superficially populist.” Much of the current scholarships in regard to Huineng examine the historical uncertainties that primarily formulated the various legends purported by his disciples, such as the likeliness of him knowing of the conversation Shenxiu had with Hongren in secrecy.

interpreted by Japanese collectors. The first recorded phase of Huineng's secular life in the *Platform Sutra*, including the incident of sudden awakening that corresponds with the *Cutting the Bamboo* motif, ranges from a time when he was a humble firewood collector until he heard the first recitation of the *Diamond Sutra* in the lodging house. Evidently, the action of cutting bamboo in this painting is appropriate to relate with Huineng's earlier years as a firewood collector. Huineng's mind became clear and awakened upon hearing the *Diamond Sutra*. It is evident that he must have had philosophical queries about life before he incidentally heard the recitation, as upon hearing it, the questions within his mind were answered and he therefore awakened. If this is indeed the original inspiration of the Japanese collector in interpreting the figure in Liang Kai's painting as Huineng, then traditional explanations of this painting proposed by subsequent scholars conflict with religious traditions of Huineng in Zen Buddhism. In the *Platform Sutra*, Huineng did not mention awakening until he heard the *Diamond Sutra* in passing, which means the explanation of awakening upon hearing the sound of striking the bamboo suggests that Huineng was not awakened prior to hearing the sutra, which contradicts with historical accounts. I would suggest that, contrary to the initial interpretation that the depicted figure is expressing a type of gesture that manifests in sudden enlightenment, Huineng is speculating on metaphysical questions while cutting the bamboo.

However, this does not explain why the figure in the painting is an elderly figure. If this is Huineng, then the story being portrayed must have occurred during the latter part of his life. The second significant stage in Huineng's life as a layman occurs after hearing the recitation of the *Diamond Sutra*, from which he learned its provenance was from the

Fifth Patriarch, Hongren, in Huangmei. After making a vow to seek out the teachings of the Buddha, he went to Huangmei:

..... Then I took leave of my mother and went to Feng-mu shan in Huang-mei and made obeisance to the Fifth Patriarch, the priest Hongren.

The priest Hongren asked me: “Where are you from that you come to this mountain to make obeisance to me? Just what is it that you are looking for from me?”

I replied: “I am from Ling-nan, a commoner from Xin Zhou. I have come this long distance only to make obeisance to you. I am seeking no particular thing, but only the Buddhadharma.”

The master then reproved me, saying: “If you’re from Ling Nan then you’re a barbarian. How can you become a Buddha?”

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

The Master wished to continue his discussion with me; however, seeing that there were other people nearby, he said no more. Then he sent me to work with the assembly. Later a lay disciple had me go to the threshing room where I spent over eight months treading the pestle.⁶⁴

This anecdote highlights Huineng’s inferior social status; impeccable intelligence; and most importantly, his lay status as a “free” laborer throughout his sojourn in Hongren’s temple. Because the Ling Nan region (present-day Guangdong and Guangxi provinces, and northern Indochina) was traditionally viewed as an area of social inferiority, which can be perceived from Huineng’s father being banished to this region, Huineng was perceived as inferior and did not receive tonsure upon his arrival to Huangmei. In fact, his lay status was preserved throughout his stay at the temple, and tonsure did not occur until much later. However, Huineng was already awakened prior to his arrival. Could this be a syncretic decipherment of laity and awakening, which is being depicted in the bamboo cutting motif? In order to further continue the investigation of

⁶⁴ Yampolsky trans., *Platform Sutra*, p 127–8. All romanization of Chinese spellings are changed to Hanyu Pinyin from Yampolsky’s Wade-Giles Zhuyin system.

Huineng's role as a laborer and awakening upon striking the bamboo, as has been suggested in Liang Kai's painting, it is necessary to understand the significance of manual labor in Zen Buddhism and its role as a tool for spiritual cultivation and awakening (particularly the Japanese understanding of it), which eventually led to the interpretation and identification of the *Cutting the Bamboo* painting.

Incorporating laborious work in monastic practice had long been a religious tradition in early China. One of the most prominent Zen classics that records monastic discipline is the *Pure Rules of Baizhang* (百丈清規 *Baizhang Qinggui*) by eighth century Chinese master Baizhang Huaihai (百丈懷海 720–814 AD).⁶⁵ This tradition of work in Zen monasteries continued when Zen Buddhism was transmitted to Japan in the thirteenth century. One of the most notable founders of Zen Buddhism in Japan, specifically, the founder of Sōtō Zen, Dōgen (道元 or Eihei Dōgen 永平道元, 1200–53 AD), went to Song Dynasty China in search of the true teachings of the Buddha in 1223 AD. On one occasion, when he was on board a ship in the port of Ningbo, he encountered an elderly monk tenzo (典座 or *dianzuo* in Chinese, a position in charge of preparing meals for a Buddhist monastery) who was in town to collect mushrooms for use in preparing food at the temple. Upon hearing he was about to depart and return to the temple, Dōgen retained him, saying:

“But surely there must be others in a place as large as Ayuwang (阿育王寺, a Zen Buddhist temple in present-day Ningbo, Zhejiang Province 浙江省寧波市) who are capable of preparing the meals. They will not be that inconvenienced if you are not there, will they?”

⁶⁵ Laborious work incorporated into Zen monasteries as a rule was proclaimed by Baizhang, which is summarized by his endeavor to propose the idea that a day without work is a day without food (一日不做 一日不食 *yiri buzuo yiri bushi*).

“I (the tenzo) have been put in charge of this work in my old age. It is, so to speak, the practice of an old man. How can I entrust all that work to others. Moreover, when I left the temple, I did not ask for permission to stay out overnight.”

“But why, when you are so old, do you do the hard work of a tenzo? Why do you not spend your time practicing zazen or working on the koans of former teachers? Is there something special to be gained from working particularly as a tenzo?”

He burst out laughing and remarked, “My good friend from abroad! You do not yet understand what practice is all about, nor do you know the meaning of characters.” (*Tenzo Kyōkun* 典座教訓, translation by Thomas Wright)⁶⁶

In this encounter between Dōgen and the tenzo from Ayuwang Temple, two paradigmatic terms in Zen Buddhism are being emphasized: work and practice. These works of a tenzo, such as carrying weighty loads of culinary ingredients and walking long distances, seem to be needless in terms of one’s spiritual cultivation (as Dōgen initially inquired of the tenzo).⁶⁷ The seemingly assiduous and cumbersome assignments of a tenzo normally induce secular perceptions of long hours of preparation and endless repetitive chores. However, the elderly monk points out that labors in his case are a form of practice. Dōgen quoted the *Chanyuan Qinggui*, stating, “Put your awakened mind to work” in the beginning of the *Tenzo Kyōkun* to further solidify the idea of manifestation of an awakened mind at work.⁶⁸

It is reasonable to believe that the two *Sixth Patriarch* paintings were painted during a time of similar philosophical dynamics in Zen Buddhism, since Dōgen’s journey

⁶⁶ Uchiyama, Kōsō, *Refining Your Life: From the Zen Kitchen to Enlightenment*, trans. Tom Wright (New York: Weatherhill, 1983), p 10–1.

⁶⁷ In the *Tenzo Kyōkun*, the tenzo states he has to walk fourteen miles in order to return to the Ayuwang Temple; that makes a total distance of twenty-eight miles in order to collect mushrooms for the temple.

⁶⁸ Uchiyama, Kōsō, *Refining Your Life: From the Zen Kitchen to Enlightenment*, trans. Tom Wright (New York: Weatherhill, 1983), p 1. *Chanyuan Qinggui* 禪苑清規 is a Song Dynasty classic that recorded monastic rules for Buddhists. Here, Dōgen specifically referenced the rules for a tenzo, which is further elaborated upon through anecdotes of his encounters in China in the subsequent text.

to Song Dynasty China overlaps with the time of Liang Kai by roughly ten years. Thus, the notion of work as practice could be one of the factors through which the subsequent audience associated the elderly layman in Liang Kai's painting with the famous historical paradigm of an "awakened mind in laborious work" in Zen hagiography.

The third stage of Huineng's life occurred after Huineng succeeded as the Sixth Patriarch and Hongren instructed him to flee to the south in order to avoid persecution from the jealous monks. Although he did not take tonsure when Hongren passed the robe and bowl (衣鉢 *yibo*) of Bodhidharma to him, it is crucial to understand the monastic rule of abstaining from killing. From legends recorded in the *Platform Sutra* and mentioned in previous anecdotes, we can perceive that Huineng was well capable to sustain his own livelihood. Therefore, during the period of living among hunters, it is reasonable to assume that Huineng resumed his status as a firewood collector, or at least partook in collecting firewood to gain finances for a prolonged period of hiding. By the time he revealed himself as the successor of Hongren at Faxing Temple (法性寺 *Faxing si*), the Sixth Patriarch was thirty-nine years old and was a considerably aged layman.

The last stage of the Sixth Patriarch's life could very much have been used to interpret the figure in Liang Kai's *Cutting the Bamboo* painting. A late eighth-century copy of Huineng's biography *Sōkei daishi betsuden* (六祖大師法寶經) was brought back to Japan by a Tendai Buddhist monk named Saichō (最澄, 767–822 AD). By the time Liang Kai's two *Sixth Patriarch* paintings had circulated to Japan and were interpreted to be of the Chinese Sixth Patriarch, the stories of Huineng would have already been familiar to the Japanese Buddhist community. The contextual background of the figure in the *Cutting the Bamboo* painting, who is deciphered to be Huineng by the Japanese

audience, could only have been based on the third stage of Huineng's life of laity. However, no single stage during Huineng's secular life could solely lead to the interpretation of the figure in the *Cutting the Bamboo* painting to be Huineng. To recapitulate, the considerably aged figure with the beard does not correspond with the first stage, since Huineng was roughly twenty-one years old.⁶⁹ However, it provides a traditional account of Huineng as a woodcutter performing identical laborious chores, as illustrated in the *Cutting the Bamboo* painting. The second stage does not refer to any event of Huineng collecting firewood, only mentioning treading rice for the temple in Huangmei, although it did reference the importance of mundane activities as perceived in Zen Buddhism by the time Chan was brought back to Japan by Dōgen. The third stage, however, leaves much room for imaginative speculation, though it does not directly reference Huineng collecting firewood while living among hunters. If we speculate on all three stages, the figure does somehow represent a syncretic identity of Huineng: the first stage provides a historical background of Huineng as a firewood collector, the second stage renders the laborious work of Huineng to be a paradigm of spiritual cultivation, while the third stage gives historical and textual leeway for the event of an aged Huineng collecting firewood while dwelling in the woods.

In light of the previous paragraph, instead of the traditional explanation of the *Cutting the Bamboo* painting illustrating Huineng awakening upon hearing the sound of striking the stalk of bamboo, I would suggest the motif of this painting is interpreted by Japanese viewers to be a unified identification of a Sixth Patriarch, whose biographical

⁶⁹ Ibid., Yampolsky mentioned that the record of the years in the *Sōkei daishi betsuden* were miscalculated. Therefore, a conservative estimation of Huineng's hiding in the woods would be sixteen to seventeen years. He was thirty-nine years old when taking tonsure and officially succeeding as the Sixth Patriarch; minus the eight months he spent at Huangmei and the sixteen years in the woods, Huineng would have been in his early twenties when he heard the recitation of the *Diamond Sutra*.

legends are as important and inspiring as his teachings. He has already awakened, but is actively carrying out the laborious work of collecting firewood to manifest the ideas of “work as practice” and “put your awakened mind to work,” which aligned with the philosophical sentiment of Zen teachings at the time the paintings were transmitted to Japan.

CHALLENGING THE CONCEPT OF AN IDEAL MONK

The *Tearing a Sutra* painting, on the other hand, illustrates an act that appears to be destructive to the conventional perception. Despite the fact that the figure is modeled after the original painting, which forms a pair with the *Cutting the Bamboo* painting, it nonetheless portrays a continuity in the paradigmatic reading of Huineng that perpetuates throughout Zen tradition.

After Huineng spent eight months treading rice for the monastery, a significant event occurred that became one of the most famous anecdotes about him, not only because it is exceptionally inspirational, but also because it determined the course of what would be considered as metaphysical orthodoxy in Zen Buddhism.⁷⁰ On one occasion, the Fifth Patriarch asked his myriad of disciples to compose Buddhist verses, or *jie* (偈) to demonstrate their understanding of his teachings and most importantly, to choose an enlightened person to succeed as the Sixth Patriarch. The most prominent disciple of Hongren at the time was the head monk, Shenxiu. He composed a verse on the wall of the corridor:

The body is the Bodhi tree,
The mind is like a clear mirror.
At all times we must strive to polish it,
And must not let the dust collect.⁷¹

⁷⁰ Suzuki, *The Zen Doctrine of No-Mind*, p 9.

Shenxiu's verse emphasizes that diligent spiritual exercises are needed in order to eliminate the impurity of the mind. When Hongren saw the verse, he realized the incompetency of the verse. Though publicly praising Shenxiu's poem, privately, Hongren conveyed his rejection to Shenxiu, stating, "You have not reached true understanding."⁷² The next day, when Huineng passed by the wall, he asked a fellow monk to write his verse on the wall as he dictated:

Bodhi originally has no tree,
The mirror also has no stand.
Buddha nature is always clean and pure;
Where is there room for dust?⁷³

This verse earned Hongren's approbation. However, in order to avoid unnecessary attention and trouble, Hongren publicly repudiated Huineng's poem and wiped it off with one of his shoes. Huineng was subsequently summoned to Hongren's chamber at night in secrecy; after reciting and deciphering the *Diamond Sutra*, Hongren passed down the Dharma and Bodhidharma's robe and sent Huineng away to stay in the south of China to avoid persecution from Shenxiu's devout followers.

This episode is among the most recited paradigmatic events in the Zen orthodox canon; the poems composed by Shenxiu and Huineng respectively display the pivotal contrast between the gradual (漸悟 *jianwu*, or gradual enlightenment, traditionally represented by Shenxiu) and sudden teachings (頓悟 *dunwu*, or sudden enlightenment, represented by Huineng). Other than the drastic contrast between the approaches to the idea of Zen practices and awakening embodied in these two verses, the most impressing

⁷¹ Yampolsky, *The Platform Sutra of the Sixth Patriarch*, p 130.

⁷² *Ibid.*, p 131.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, p 132.

message that one could get from this anecdote is that Huineng was able to demonstrate his spiritual intelligence to perceive the true teachings of the Buddha despite never having been formally educated and trained in Buddhist teachings.

However, the question as to what constitutes Huineng being illiterate becomes essential to understanding the action of tearing a sutra. Is the notion of illiteracy strictly constrained within the inability to write and read, or does it imply in a broader sense the incapability of intellectual understanding? A few key events in Huineng's lay-life provide an answer to this question. Huineng hearing the *Diamond Sutra* and awakening prior to his journey to Huangmei demonstrates an inherent intellectual agility despite not being trained as a learned scholar. Despite being unable to read and write, he could understand the meaning of the *Diamond Sutra* upon hearing it; therefore, when signifying the idea of illiteracy, in the case of Huineng, it does not refer to his ability to decipher Buddhist scripture.

The second event is the seemingly obstinate dialogue between Huineng and Hongren. His illiteracy and lack of formal training in Buddhism appeared to have little significance in impacting his ability to demonstrate his *hui-gen* (慧根, literally root of wisdom that can lead one to comprehend truth). Therefore, Huineng displayed an inherent nature of enlightenment, the Buddha nature, which he states to be within sentient beings, and the manifestation of Buddha nature does not depend on literal expression or training. The conversation between Huineng and Hongren does not imply an intellectually ignorant person unable to comprehend Buddha's teaching.

The third event was the contest of composing poems. Besides the memorable poem that largely summarized Huineng's teaching on emptiness (空性 *kongxing*, or the

nature of emptiness), one thing that is worth noting is the literal expression of this verse, which was due to the aid of a fellow monk since Huineng could not read and write. Such an act of demonstrating the embodiment of one's awakened mind seems, although not directly within personal means to manifest physically or in tangible forms, to be expressed in literal form through aiding others. In the end, the original verse was wiped off from the wall by Hongren, which resonates with the intrinsic empty nature narrated in Huineng's poem. The act of wiping could be understood as an act that corresponds with the idea that Huineng personifies, the awakened mind within literal expression, but the result of a clean wall somehow marks the poem as only an illusion of impermanence as the others try to capture the meaning of the verse in haste.

The literal manifestation of an awakened mind through other's aid, and the eventual vanishing of this manifestation emphasized the crucial role of Huineng's illiteracy and the embodiment of Buddha nature. His lack of formal education and Buddhist training signify an inherent empty mind without pedantic and conceptual restrictions, and it is this unconfined mind that could comprehend the emptiness of the Buddha nature. His illiteracy does not mean he is ignorant; on the contrary, it is an embodiment of the empty nature of Huineng's mind, as a different version of his poem demonstrates: "*benlai wu yiwu* (from the first not a thing is)."⁷⁴

This event not only demonstrates that Huineng's illiterate mind could be awakened, but most importantly, his illiteracy's triumph over literacy, which is represented by Shenxiu, the most well-trained and educated eminent monk among Hongren's disciples. In the *Platform Sutra*, Shenxiu, though depicted in the form of an

⁷⁴ Ibid., p 94. This line replaces the third line of Huineng's poem in later versions of the *Platform Sutra*. Yalmpolsky references Suzuki's translation in this book, perhaps due to it accurately capturing the original essence of the verse.

antagonist and the frontrunner to be the Sixth Patriarch, displays a well-learned quality and had a rather promising reputation among his fellow monks. When Hongren asked all his disciples to compose a verse to demonstrate their spiritual state, none of the monks besides Shenxiu composed a verse. The *Platform Sutra* tells us:

The disciples received his (Hongren) instructions and returned, each to his own room. They talked it over among themselves, saying: ‘There’s no point in us purifying our minds and making efforts to compose a verse to present to the priest. Shenxiu, the head monk, is our teacher. After he obtains the Dharma we can rely on him, so let’s not compose verses.’ They all then gave up trying and did not have the courage to present a verse.⁷⁵

Hongren, after receiving the verse on the wall in front of his hall, approved it to be of great quality, and said all the disciples should follow the examples demonstrated by Shenxiu’s verse. In secrecy, he called in Shenxiu and told him his verse did not demonstrate a true understanding of the Buddha dharma.⁷⁶ I am not going to further discuss the reason why Hongren did not deem Shenxiu as awakened as it involves a religious debate between gradual and sudden teachings.⁷⁷ However, the position of Shenxiu as the opposite counterpart of Huineng displays an aspect of the institutionalized, and even popularized religious pedagogies of the time. In *The Northern School and the Formation of Early Ch’an Buddhism*, John R. McRae describes Shenxiu as a “consummate scholar; outspoken and uncompromising supporter of Buddhism; and ardent practitioner and teacher of meditation, the epitome of Buddhist spiritual crafts.”⁷⁸

⁷⁵ Ibid., p 128.

⁷⁶ Ibid., p 130–1.

⁷⁷ Various scholars, such as McRae, Yampolsky, etc. critique this event, suggesting it was included by Shenhui, Huineng’s disciple, in an effort to demonize and demean Shenxiu and the Northern School of Zen Buddhism represented by him.

Despite the legendary depiction of Shenxiu in the *Platform Sutra*, he was rather well received as a pre-eminent monk whose reputation not only permeated among Buddhists, but also received the support of Empress Wu Zetian (武則天, 624–705).⁷⁹ In the *Chuangfa Baoji* 傳法寶紀, Shenxiu was received by Empress Wu in late 700 AD:

[Empress Wu] Zetian sent a palace messenger to escort [Shenxiu] to Luoyang. Monks and laypeople spread flowers in his path, and the banners and canopies [on the vehicles of the wealthy and prestigious] filled the streets. He entered the palace riding on a litter of a type reserved for members of the imperial family) and decked with palm leaves. [Empress Wu], following him, touched her forehead to the ground and knelt long in a spirit of reverent dedication and chaste purity. When [Shenxiu] administered the precepts to the court ladies, all the four classes [of Buddhists] took refuge in him with the same feelings of veneration that they had for their own parents. From princes and nobles on down, everyone [in the capital] took refuge in him. (*Chuangfa Baoji*, translated by McRae)

In contrast with the somewhat antagonistic depiction of Shenxiu, the historical account of him displays a different perception of him that forms a contrasting character with Huineng. Historically speaking, his status on the spectrum of Zen Buddhism was far more popular at his time than Huineng's. Shenxiu was a well-learned Buddhist master. After taking his full precepts at the age of twenty, he spent his energy studying the Buddhist laws, meditation, and teachings.⁸⁰ After he went to Huangmei and became a disciple of Hongren, the Master took him in and taught him personally for six years: “[Shenxiu] worked day and night for six years. Great Master Hongren sighed and said: ‘Shenxiu has completely mastered East Mountain Teaching.’ Hongren [then] ordered his

⁷⁸ McRae, *The Northern School and the Formation of Early Ch'an Buddhism*, p 47.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, p 51.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, p 47.

student to wash his feet and take his seat alongside [of the master]. (*Chuangfa Baoji*, translated by McRae)”⁸¹

Therefore, it is conspicuous that Shenxiu exemplified de facto the Buddhist paradigm among most of the Chan Buddhists of his time. His quality as a Chan disciple was approved by Hongren, and subsequently he became a master recognized by the Empress, which indeed sheds a different light on him than in the *Platform Sutra*. On the contrary, Huineng’s reputation during his time mainly came from the *Platform Sutra*. Historical accounts of his fame during his lifetime are significantly modest in comparison with Shenxiu.⁸² In fact, Shenxiu was a more ideal monk than Huineng based on secular perceptions, who mastered Buddhist teachings and received the reputation of a Zen master who was received by the sole female emperor in Chinese history. His reputation would have favored him to be the ideal candidate for the next Sixth Patriarch of Zen Buddhism.

However, one must distinguish the secular fame that was being captured by popular perceptions from a spiritual altitude, which is what the *Platform Sutra* was trying to convey. The historical scheme that the subsequent Zen tradition portrays after Shenxiu and Huineng provides an anti-conventional paradigmatic figure of Huineng, who appeared to be a hero to challenge the conventional concept of an ideal monk—well-learned, master of Zen teachings, and high prestige among both monastic and secular communities. Huineng is practically the polar opposite of the ideal monk that Shenxiu

⁸¹ Ibid., p 48.

⁸² Yampolsky, *The Platform Sutra of the Sixth Patriarch*, p 59. Most records about Huineng, primarily the *Platform Sutra*, were all composed after him. In fact, historical documents of him during his lifetime do not exist other than a mention of Huineng as one of Hongren’s disciples. In comparison with the records of Huineng and the Southern School, the Northern School and Shenxiu were recorded in significant quantity until its subsequent decline.

represents: he was of humble provenance, illiterate, and maintained a modest reputation in his time.

Liang Kai's *Tearing a Sutra* painting illustrates similar characteristics that resonate with Huineng's reputable role as a Zen hero who took the path opposite of conventional perceptions. The figure in Liang Kai's *Tearing a Sutra* could be deciphered in an action of destroying the literal representation of Buddha's teachings. Just as Hongren wiped off Huineng's poem from the wall to tacitly approve his state of enlightenment and return the poem's verbal manifestation of the teaching of Zen to the original nature of "from the first not a thing is," the figure tore the Sutra, in which the Buddha's teachings were recorded verbally, to return the spirit and enlightened mind to the true state of non-existence. The figure in Liang Kai's painting challenges the verbal perception of concepts, just as Huineng defied the conventional perception of an ideal monk like Shenxiu. It portrays an avant-garde spiritual figure who corresponds retrospectively with Bodhidharma's creed, the non-establishment of words (不立文字 *buli wenzi*). Thus, the figure in the *Tearing a Sutra* painting represents a figure of anti-convention with verbal detachment characteristics, whose paradigmatic features are primarily associated with the Sixth Patriarch, Huineng.

CHAPTER IV

CONCLUSION

In terms of historical accuracy, it is reasonable to suggest that Liang Kai's *Sixth Patriarch* paintings shed scarce indication to the depicted figure's identity as the historical Huineng. However, much of the metaphysical traditions and romanticism surrounding these paintings provide a better reading and comprehension that the figure is associated with Huineng and the Zen teachings that were largely rendered based on the paradigmatic virtues derived from the legends of the Sixth Patriarch. Indeed, legends of Huineng perpetuated within the Zen tradition provide a much more inspiring reading of the two paintings and associate them with the syncretic symbolism of the "scattered sage" Huineng and represent his earlier life as a laborious layman.

In the historical accounts of Huineng, his early biography as a layman present him as a laborious sage that culminated with the Zen understanding of "work as practice." Throughout the three stages of his lay life, from a modest firewood collector; to the lay disciple of Hongren, the Fifth Patriarch at Huangmei; to subsequently becoming ensconced in the mountainous region in southern China, Huineng nevertheless inspires the audience of *Cutting the Bamboo* with the metaphysical inspiration of an enlightened mind at work. As this notion of work as practice was not exclusive to Chinese Chan, Dōgen (in the thirteenth century) proactively built such a notion into spiritual practice and perpetuated this notion in Japanese Zen, through which Huineng's inspiring tales from the three phases of his earlier life contribute to a syncretic representation and religious symbolism of Huineng in Liang Kai's *Cutting the Bamboo*, regardless of the absence of direct literal and historical references from Huineng's *Platform Sutra*.

Huineng's legendary struggles within the monastic community, from an illiterate layman gaining his initial instantaneous awakening upon hearing the *Diamond Sutra*, challenging Hongren with "what difference is there to our Buddha nature," to the eventual composition of the legendary poem demonstrating a brilliant mind of awakening and eventually receiving the dharma as the Sixth Patriarch of Zen Buddhism, all are encapsulated in the mere motion of tearing a sutra in the *Tearing a Sutra* painting. The sheer notion of destroying literal pedagogy and overthrowing conventional concepts as to what constitutes an ideal monk by monastic institutions precisely align the stories of Huineng with other defiant monks and sages who are prominently lauded within Zen tradition.

Individual readings, that is, interpreting the *Sixth Patriarch* paintings independently from each leads to many flaws in understanding how the figure could retrospectively resonate with Huineng and his virtues. However, perhaps that is the sole reason why these two paintings form a diptych that formulates a much more reasonable understanding of the figure in representing Huineng. A humble man that exhibits an enlightened mind through mundane labor challenges the conventional concepts in the monastic institution, and what could be a more conspicuous religious paragon in Zen tradition that synchronizes a scatter sage like Huineng? It is these syncretic and yet imaginative readings that evoke Huineng and the romanticism of Zen, which colligates with him in Liang Kai's *Sixth Patriarch* paintings.

Historical and literal accuracy invest no stock in these imaginative romanticisms that are evoked to inspire paradigmatic virtues when in fact, the paintings are much more valuable and affectuous in such a manner since this imaginative romanticism perpetuates

virtues that stimulate, and even shape the course of development of understanding Zen. Even McRae, who holds a very critical view towards Huineng and the *Platform Sutra*, emphasizes his first law of Zen studies to be “it’s not true, and therefore it’s more important”:

What counts in the Chan transmission scheme are not the “facts” of what happened in the lives of Sakyamuni, Bodhidharma, Huineng, and others, but rather how these figures were perceived in terms of Chan mythology ... but rather than being fixated on notions of fact and fabrication, we should notice the very dynamism of the mythopoeic processes involved. Whether or not any anecdote actually represents the words spoken and events that occurred “accurately” is only a historical accident, and in any case the supposedly “original” events would have involved only a very small number of people, at most the members of a single local community. What is of far greater consequence is the process by which that anecdote was generated and circulated, edited and improved, and thus transmitted throughout an entire population of Chan practitioners and devotees, until it became part of the fluid body of legendary lore by which Chan masters came to be identified throughout Chinese culture.⁸³

In the case of the *Sixth Patriarch* paintings, the legendary anecdotes and imaginative inspiration of Huineng insinuate the influence of “not true, but more important,” and perpetuate not only within the Chinese understanding of Huineng, but the Zen sphere at large.

Despite the critical and sympathetic discourse into Huineng by historical and religious scholarships, perhaps the genuine essence of Huineng’s Chan can truly be appreciated within works of art such as Liang Kai’s, without much constriction from historical accuracy and risking involvement in the polarized discussions between gradual-sudden teachings and Northern-Southern schools. The images simply inspire audiences, from literati in Song Dynasty China to the much more prestigious collectors in Japan, with a glance into the reading of the “true nature” of Huineng’s Chan.

⁸³ McRae, *Seeing through Zen*, p 5–6.

APPENDIX A

FIGURES



Figure 1

Liang Kai, *The Sixth Patriarch Cutting the Bamboo*, Song Dynasty (960–1279 AD), ink on paper, 72.7 x 31.5 cm, Tokyo National Museum, Japan



Figure 2

Liang Kai, *The Sixth Patriarch Tearing a Sutra*, Song Dynasty (960–1279 AD),
ink on paper, 72.9 x 31.6 cm, Mitsu Memorial Museum, Japan



Figure 3
Liang Kai, *Shakyamuni Descending the Mountain*, ink on paper, 117.6 x 52 cm,
Tokyo National Museum, ChinaOnlineMuseum

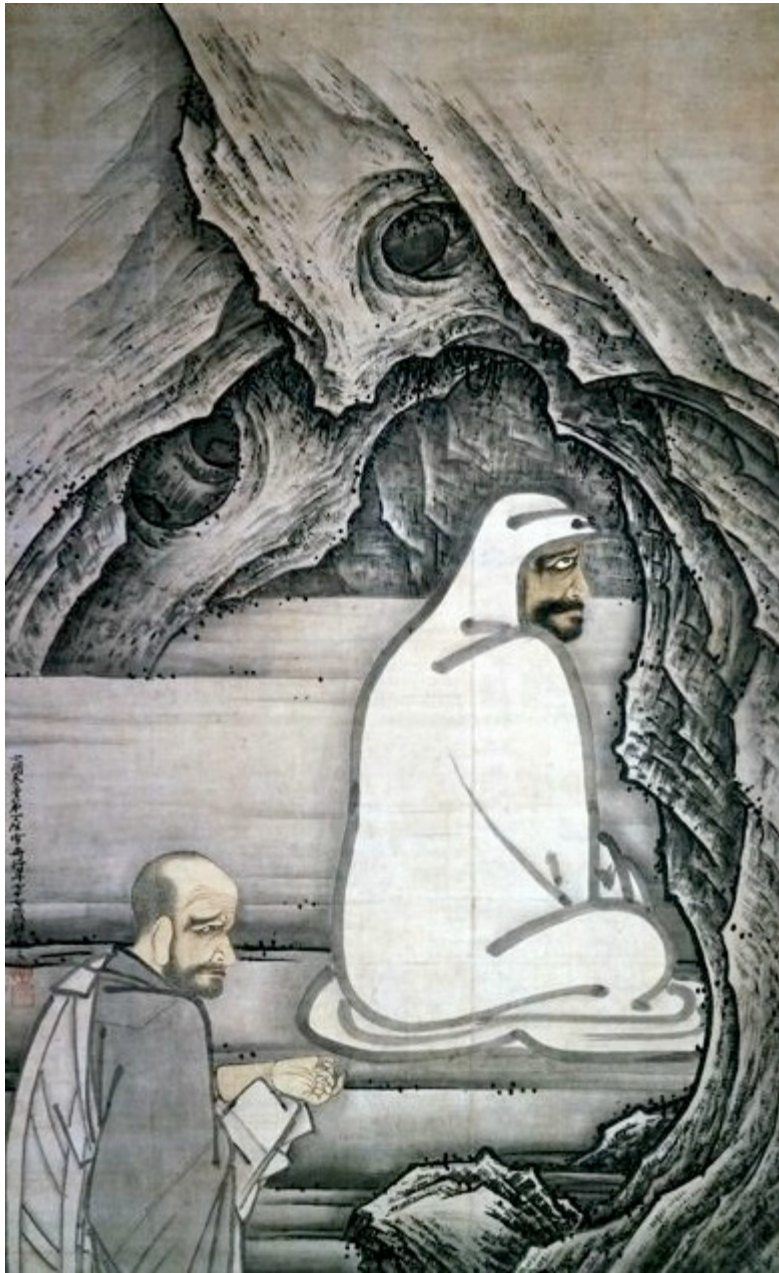


Figure 4

Sesshu 雪舟, *Eka Danpi* 慧可斷臂 (Huiké cutting off his arm), 1498, Sainenji Temple 齋年寺, Aichi Prefecture, Japan



Figure 5

Muqi Fachang 牧溪法常, *The Shrimp Eater* 蜆子和尚圖, inscribed by Yanxi Guangwen 偃溪廣聞, ink on paper, 84.7 x 31.4 cm, private collection, Japan



Figure 6

Yintuoluo 因陀羅, *Danxia Tianran Burning a Wooden Buddha Image* 丹霞燒仏図, Bridgestone Art Museum (Ishibashi Collection), Tokyo



Figure 7

Zhiweng Ruoqing, *The Sixth Patriarch Carrying a Pole* 六祖挾擔圖, Daitōkyū Memorial Library, Tokyo. Yukio Lippit, *Apparition Painting*, p 62

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