

Chinul – Tracing Back the Radiance, 1158-1210

Notes by Jeong Ji

Known as the Founder of Korean Zen

A window into our practice lineage.

We might look to his example as we begin to formulate or at least try to wrap our heads around our tradition as it evolves as American Zen.

Chinul never received formal transmission from a Zen master nor did he stay with any master for a long time. He never made a pilgrimage to China, so had to find guidance through the study of Buddhist sutras themselves. He had a natural eclecticism, borrowing from whatever teaching of scripture he found helpful. Also a balanced methodology: offering a wide range of teaching techniques based on a blend of scholarly study, intense practice.

A Look at Buddhism in Korea Before Chinul

- Close ties with the ruling families, native and popular elements absorbed, emphasis on practical benefits over spiritual achievement.
- Koreans absorbed all the practice methodologies and scholarly writings from China, and became the most ecumenical source for those materials. Note: Korean Zen today probably most resembles the Zen of ancient China, in the “Golden Era” of the Tang and Song Dynasties. From the earliest days of Zen in China, Korean monks studied under Chinese Masters.
- From its beginnings, Buddhism in Korea was state-supported. There was a Monk’s Militia.
- Influence, absorption of native shamanistic practices; Korean Buddhism kept flavors of magic and miracles.
- Era of split between Zen and scholastic schools.
- Also disputes between Northern and Southern schools of Zen in China (i.e. - gradual and sudden). Disharmony between Buddhist sects (Ta Hui, and his rants against Silent Illumination).

Life of Chinul

At the time of his birth, Buddhism was firmly entrenched. Buddhism was a powerful institution, issued vast tracts of land and buildings. Monks were exempt from military and the trials of peasant life. Ranks of monks swelled, along with corruption. Intensity of practice and study declined. Mountaintop Zen schools were lured away to intellectual centers, thereby weakening. Competition between scholastic and Zen schools.

Chinul was born during volatile period of social unrest. Born to a family of the gentry class, his father was an academy official. Chinul’s constitution was weak, many illnesses. His father made a bargain with

Buddha that if his Zen was cured, he would have him ordained into the Buddhist order. Chinul survived, and had his head shaved at the age of seven; precepts at 15, given the name Chinul. Natural inclination to solitude and reflection. Not much personal instruction with teachers. Self-reliant, self-study of Buddhist scriptures and Zen practice. He experimented with his own practice, using scripture to inform and perfect his meditation technique.

Outspoken about corruption

He went to the capital and passed his monastic exams, but became disgusted with the worldly ambitions and climate surrounding them., and he voiced a desire to return to proper monk's life. With a handful of friends, vowed to set up a retreat society, self-sufficient, dedicated to awakening. This would be the first of its kind in Korea (already widespread in China), resembling, in some ways, Zen Centers in the West, wherein there is a self-sufficient program of work, study and intensive meditation. However his project was delayed. He settled in the southern part of Korea, close to access to the Southern Sung dynasty center of China. Established idea, 90 degrees on ZC, demonstration of necessary courage, but this is not enough to carry it through.

Had first awakening, which influenced his teaching and direction, in which he stressed the need for an initial awakening experience. About his first awakening experience, he said:

*By chance one day in the study hall as he was looking through the Platform Sutra of the Sixth Patriarch, he came across a passage which said, "The self-nature of suchness gives rise to thoughts. But even though the six sense-faculties see, hear, sense and know, it is not tainted by the myriads of images. The true nature is constantly free and self-reliant." Astonished, **he was overjoyed at gaining what he had never experienced before and, getting up, he walked around the hall, reflecting on the passage while continuing to recite it.** His heart was satisfied. From that time on, his mind was averse to fame and profit; he desired only to dwell in seclusion in the mountain ravines. Bearing hardship joyfully, he aspired to the path; he was obsessed with the quest.*

What's striking to me about this "*first enlightenment*" is that it seems to have clarified his heart/mind direction, more like a cognitive awakening of faith than a shattering of self. We might liken this experience to those of us who read our first book on Zen or heard a dharma talk and felt that keen joy of recognition.

Clarification on the term "faith": distinction between Buddhist tradition and Western theological "faith in..." which is a dualistic construction. According to our Zen approach, "faith" is based on direct experience of an essence-function model.

In part, this first awakening was inspired by cognitive study, and this led him to try and reconcile the differences between the two schools of thought (sutra study and Zen). He was convinced that the Zen approach was confirmed in the sutras.

1185: went wandering and settled in another remote area to deepen his understand and practice. Kept the hwa do: "Mind is Buddha" and looked for confirmation of this approach in the sutras. Found this simile in the Avatamsaka Sutra: 'one dust mote containing thousands of volumes of sutras', and later in

the same chapter: 'The wisdom of the tathagatas is just like this: it is complete in the bodies of all sentient beings. It is merely all these ordinary, foolish people who are not aware of it and do not recognize it.'

Chinul, in his own practice, wanted to clarify how to access awakening. **Awakening to Great Faith** would, necessarily, need to be combined with **Great Question** (Son), and **Great Courage** (continued, constant development). This should sound familiar!

1188: Samadhi and Prajna Community: (Samadhi=Essence=Sudden; Prajna=Function/Wisdom=Gradual) Eight years after the initial pact to create a sincere practice retreat center, finally set it up. Of the initial group of 10, only 3 or 4 were able to come. First retreat: 1190.

1197: gained large following; likened to a little city. Building, developments. This became the founding of [Songgwangsa](#) at Jogye Mountain, which developed into the [Jogye Order](#), teaching a comprehensive approach to Buddhism including meditation, doctrine, chanting and lectures.

Chinul went off for a period to deepen his own practice wherein he attained his final awakening. In his own words:

"Since I came from Pomun—more than ten years had passed. Although I was satisfied with the diligence of my cultivation and did not waste my time, I had not yet forsaken passions and views—it was as if my chest were blocked by something, or as if I were dwelling together with an enemy. I went to live on Mount Chiri and found a passage in the Records of the Zen Master Ta-hui which said, 'Son does not consist in quietude; it does not consist in bustle. It does not involve the activities of daily life; it does not involve logical discrimination. Nevertheless, it is of first importance not to investigate Zen while rejecting quietude or bustle, the activities of daily life, or logical discrimination. If your eyes suddenly open, the Zen is something which exists inside your very own home.' I understood this passage. Naturally, nothing block my chest again and I never again dwelt together with an enemy. From then on I was at peace."

Ta-hui (1089-1163) in the Lin-chi line, proponent of the hwa-do method. Chinul was the first Korean teacher to adopt this approach. (I recommend [Swampland Flowers](#), Ta-hui's letters to students...)

Major Points of Chinul's Approach

- Chinul became a fusion artist of Buddhist thought and practice. He saw that the Northern and Southern Schools were just two aspects of the same teachings. Recognized the implicit dangers/advantages of both.
- The goal of all Buddhist training then is Buddhahood, gained through 1) an initial sudden awakening experience which is characterized by absolute calmness, spaciousness of mind followed by 2) dynamic, moment-by-moment clear and keen-eyed engagements with life, realizing Bodhisattva action through gradual cultivation.

- This is what we refer to as substance (essence) and function, though we talk about it more as a moment-by-moment order of operations.
- Chinul's Major Written Works: *Secrets on Cultivating the Mind, Encouragement to Practice, Excerpts from the Dharma Collection, Special Practice Record, The Complete and Sudden Attainment of Buddhahood and Resolving Doubts About Observing the Hwadu, Straight Talk on the True Mind* (laid out groundwork for sudden/gradual approach, first “awakening to the mind-nature” with the simultaneous cultivation of Samadhi and prajna, and the concurrent development of alertness and calmness of mind).

Notes on Awakening of Faith

- The Ancient Text: Awakening of Faith: “Faith requires two approaches: first, *faith should be based on excellent understanding, then one's faith shall be truthful*; second, *practice should follow faith, then one's faith shall not become false*.” Taken from *An Edited Explication of the Discourse on the Awakening of Faith in the Mahayana* by Master Chi Hoi (attributed to Aśvaghōṣa (c.100), though no Sanskrit version of the text has survived. The two earliest existing versions are written in Chinese, and contemporary scholars widely accept the theory that the text is a Chinese composition)
 - Written from the perspective of Essence-Function, this text sought to harmonize the two philosophies of the Buddha-nature and Eight Consciousnesses (or Yogacara) into a synthetic vision, based on the One Mind in Two Aspects:
 - Relevance to Kyol Che kong-an: Are the form-body and the Dharma-body the same or different?
 - In the words of the Awakening of Faith — which summarizes the essentials of Mahayana — self and world, mind and essence/substance, are integrally one. Everything is a carrier or manifestation of that enlightenment; all initial enlightenment experience is grounded in it. The mystery of existence is, then, not, “How may we overcome alienation?” The challenge is, rather, “Why do we think we are lost in the first place?”
- *Awakening of Faith* had a profound impact on Korean Zen development, perhaps more than any other culture.

Sudden Awakening, Gradual Cultivation

Optimal Regimen for Zen Training:

1. Initial Sudden Awakening experience
2. Followed by gradual cultivation of that enlightenment

Clarification: One’s initial understanding of awakening occurs on a relative level, before one undertakes cultivation, occurring from a proper understanding of the mind and its characteristics, its essence and

function. This allows one entrance into the preliminary stages in preparation for the bodhisattva path. In subsequent realization, one awakens after cultivation has matured, which is the ultimate awakening, an understanding which has permeated one's entire being, leading one deeply into the bodhisattva path and arousing bodhicitta.

- In Chinul's experience, and in essentially all Zen teachers' admonishments for instruction, however you describe an awakening, it must be 100% complete. Hence, according to Chinul, *there can be no gradual cultivation/sudden awakening*. We can look at the quality of our student's engagement to see plenty of examples of this false approach, that has no hope of attainment. Example: student tries out Tibetan style of meditation, "gets" the idea, then at some point becomes disenchanted with some other aspect, switches to Zen, pattern repeats, student never attains 100% faith in his/her own awakening.
- Also he perceived the problem a typical Rinzai approach: sudden awakening/sudden cultivation. Leads to abuse of power, the idea that anyone could be "finished" is akin to the delusion that an enlightened master is not subject to cause and effect.
- Chinul emphasizes throughout his writings that the success of any practice depends on a sudden awaking to the fact of Buddhahood. Without the confidence that such experience brings, the rigorous and 10,000-year practice cannot be sustained.
- Reflections: this approach de-emphasizes the "big bang" of enlightenment, which, I feel, is healthy and wise. Some supposed enlightened masters behave miserably; some supposed unenlightened students behave like Buddhas. (my way of understanding this: there are no enlightened beings; there is only enlightened *being*)

Five Methods of Meditation Technique

Chinul makes the point that there is no one teaching technique; rather, it is a student's innate capacity that is the determining factor. Unique in his time, Chinul was willing to apply a range of practices, all of which lead to the same place of awakening.

This supports the requirement for an initial awakening of faith. As teachers, we need to be able to discern our students' inclinations and inhibitions, and act as guides and custodians.

Taught according to students' capabilities (much like we do in our tradition, though I would not rank them in terms of inferiority and superiority!)

1. The recollection of the Buddha's names for those of lowest capacity. (mantra practice)

Somewhat like Pure Land practice, but Chinul reinterprets this aspiration by beginning with simple verbal recitation, which then leads to recollection of the Buddha in thoughtlessness and then eventually to direct experience of suchness. It can still lead to direct realization.

2. Cultivation of Samadhi and Prajñā while maintaining alertness and calmness for those of inferior capacity. (clear mind, clear mind, clear mind; don't know)

As one develops inner focus of meditation, one learns to be content within oneself. The mental processes are calmed and absorption, or pure mental concentration, is achieved. Through this concentration, one investigates the world and oneself, and one's relationships between the two. This leads to the discovery of one's true nature, breaking one's attachment to the senses, eliminating craving, greed, hatred and delusion, and attaining liberation. Samadhi is the essence of self-nature and is characterized by calmness. Prajñā is the function of self-nature, and is characterized by alertness. Zhiyi Seung Sahn talked about this in terms of keeping a mind which is clear like space, but functions at the tip of a needle.

3. The development of faith and understanding for those of average capacity. (Chinul's 1st enlightenment)

Awakening is also the goal of faith and understanding. Knowing this at the beginning of one's training, one is endowed with the wisdom and compassion of Buddhahood in potential form, which establishes one on the path of the bodhisattva. One still must develop and cultivate practice and vow to stay on the path to the final stages of Buddhahood. Awakening gives one the ability to see through one's habits so one can apply the appropriate skillful means until the defilements subside.

4. The shortcut approach of the hwadu for those of superior capacity. (Hwa do, or kong-an study)

The hwadu was simply the primary topic of an entire situation of the koan story. Chinul was the first teacher in Korea to advocate the hwadu use. The hwadu is a shortcut to realization because it proposes that enlightenment is achieved without the traditional development through moral training, concentration, and wisdom.

In technique, one can either investigate the meaning of the hwadu, or as a more effective tool, one can investigate a word itself, such as "Mu"/No! in order to destroy all defects of conceptualization. By investigating the word itself, one is prevented from going into intellectual understandings. This doubt grows in intensity, interrupting one's dualistic thoughts, until one's fundamental consciousness is revealed (anything can set it off; a gong, a traffic light, etc).

5. The practice of thoughtlessness for those of highest capacity. (shikantaza)

Chinul explored this method in his book, Straight Talk on the True Mind, wherein he describes 10 ways of practicing no-mind/before-thinking mind. Through blocking out attention to either sense-objects or the activities of thought, or through various combinations of the two.

Samadhi and Prajna

Chinul emphasizes that **samadhi and prajna need to be cultivated in tandem**. In our lingo, Samadhi=180 degrees, setting calculator to 0, absolute world; prajna= 360 degrees, moment world, finding correct function with wisdom and compassion.

- 2-4 in his meditation techniques are considered to be the main approaches; the 1st and 5th, for students of least or most capacity, respectively.
- Emphasized the point that each method could be followed exclusively, or there could be a progression from simpler to more difficult.
- **Samadhi and prajna have two major interpretations: in relative and absolute forms**
 - **Relative form:** (gradual school), deals with objects in the conditioned realm (self and other) in order to remove impurities. It is used to counter the tendency toward distraction. (let go of attachments and thinking-samadhi, bring attention back to direct experience-prajna; i.e.-what do you hear? What do you see?). In this relative form, Samadhi and prajna are instruments for counteracting ignorance and defilements.
 - **Absolute form:** (Chinul's sudden approach to enlightenment) *Samadhi and Prajna are viewed as two aspects of the same self-nature.* (Seung Sahn's "Without-like-this" and Become-One-Like-This")
 - Although each has its own role and manifestation, they are not to be differentiated. **Samadhi** is the **essence** of self-nature and is characterized by **calmness/spaciousness**; **prajna** is the **function** of that self-nature and is characterized by **alertness**. (we say, in teaching meditation, sit completely relaxed, but with the attention of a cat poised in front of a mouse hole; important to clarify **both**).
 - Both are based in non-dual self-nature. Samadhi is the essence of prajna, and prajna is the functioning of Samadhi (manifesting as radiance or bare awareness)

Gradual Cultivation

- After sudden awakening, the power of habit will continue to immerse student in defilements. Original harmony becomes distorted in such a way that essence and function get out of balance. We can look at our own proclivities to see this readily
 - If essence predominates, dullness might result. If function is exaggerated, distraction might develop from excessive alertness. At such a time, the relative practice of Samadhi and prajna should be applied to deal with the problem.
 - Calmness and alertness need to be kept in a scrupulous balance. Regardless of method of practice, student must be attentive to the equilibrium between these elements.
 - Chinul quotes Ta-hui, in response to why gradual cultivation is necessary:
 - "Often gifted people can break through this affair and achieve sudden awakening without expending a lot of strength. Then they relax and do not try to counteract the habit-energies and deluded thoughts. Finally, after the

passage of many days and months, they simply wander on as before and are unable to avoid samsara.”

Examination of No-Mind

Analogy of empty bottle: doesn't mean “no bottle”, or that it is made of no material. I.e.- your mind will be empty yet filled with wonder and calmness. Techniques of practicing No-Mind:

1. Attention. “Do not fear the arising of thoughts; only be concerned lest your awareness of them be tardy.”
2. Rest. “This means that when we are practicing, we do not think of either good or evil. As soon as any mental state arises, we rest; when we meet with conditions, we rest.”
3. Efface the mind but preserve objects. *Just seeing*. (3-6 are the same as Lin Chi's practice instructions)
4. Efface objects but preserve the mind. *What am I?*
5. Efface both mind and objects. *Become one*.
6. Preserve both mind and objects. *Truth is just like this*.
7. Internal and external are all the same *essence*.
8. Internal and external are all the same *function*.
9. Substance and function are identical. *How may I help you?*
10. Transcend essence and function. *Just do it*.

A Few Selected Teachings

True Mind Beyond Death

“Question: We have heard that men who have seen the nature transcend birth and death. However, all the patriarchs of the past had seen the nature; and yet they all were born and they all died. Nowadays, we see that those who are cultivating the path are born and will die too. How can we leave behind birth and death?”

Chinul: Birth and death are originally nonexistent; they exist because of a false notion. It is like a person with diseased eyes who sees flowers in the sky..... As a sutra says: Men of good family! Since time immemorial all sentient beings have been subject to all kinds of inverted views. They are like people who have confused the four directions. They wrongly assume that the four elements are their own bodies. They regard the shadows conditioned by the six sense-objects as their own minds. This is like diseased eyes which see flowers in the sky. Yet even if all the flowers in the sky were to vanish from space, it still could not be said that they actually vanished And why is this? Because they never came

into existence in the first place. All sentient beings mistakenly perceive an arising and a ceasing within this non-arising state. For this reason, it is called the revolving wheel of birth and death.”

Testing the True Mind’s Operation

“Question: When the true mind appears, how do we know that it has matured without obstructions?

Chinul: Although the true mind might manifest to those who are training on the path, if they have not yet eliminated their habit-energies they will occasionally lose their mindfulness when they encounter matured objects. It is like a herdsman who has trained his ox to follow obediently but still would not dare to lay down his whip or tether. He must wait until the ox’s mind is fully trained and its pace steady, so that even if he guided it through a field of tender young rice sprouts it would not harm the paddy. Only then would he dare to loosen his grip. At that stage, even though he does not use the whip or tether, the ox would not injure the young sprouts. It is the same for the man on the path. Even after he has realized the true mind he has to strive to maintain and nurture that realization in order to obtain great power and function; then and only then will he be able to benefit sentient beings.

If there comes a time when you want to test this true mind, you should take all the hateful and lustful situations you have encountered throughout your whole life and imagine that they are right before you. If a hateful or lustful state of mind arises as before, your mind of the path is immature.”

Chinul quotes the following Gāthā of Zen Master Lung-men Fo-yen

Chinul: **“The meaning of complete and sudden awakening and understanding implies no special expedients; it involves merely one thought of personal faith. If your faith is insufficient, you can make use of the power of many skillful means, but you will still end up creating difficulties for yourself.”**

Delusion means to be deluded about awakening,
Awakening means to be awakened to delusion.
Delusion and awakening are the same essence--
Once you awaken you will know this.

In delusion you take south for north
And grasp at this observation as being real.
Actually north is originally the same as south--
Upon awakening you will no longer doubt it.

If you delve into the conditions of delusion,
You cannot find the place where they arise.
Should you suddenly awaken to the right direction,
Where can delusion go?

Delusion is just delusion,
It is you yourself who wrongly assign value.
Through the mistaken attention of the saṃsāric mind,
You vainly accept doctrinal tenets.

If you penetrate through delusion and falsity disappears,
Your joy will be limitless.
The slaying of the brigand, ignorance,
Happens in an instant.
Within that instant,
You arcanelly pervade the chiliocosm [countless universes].

If there is immediate cognition,
The three time periods become an empty mystery.
Since beginningless time,
All things exist now today.
For the rest of time,
You need search no further.

The present thought is thoughtless,
The numinous light is brilliant.
As the numinous brilliance shines ever bright,
The mind's awareness is difficult to block.

The numinous source reaches clear to the blue sky
And enters all phenomena in creation.
When ocean seal samādhi manifests clearly,
You will be unconcerned about activity or rest.

Sources:

1. Tracing Back the Radiance: Chinul's Korean Way of Zen, by Robert Buswell
2. Awakening of Faith, attributed to Aśvaghoṣa

http://www.thezensite.com/ZenTeachings/Translations/Awakening_of_faith.html

Homework – The View From Here

One of the reasons Chinul's life and practice is striking is because of his strong practice direction and innovative spirit. He had the courage to simply walk out on the stagnant and corrupt powers in Buddhist society. But then, rather than rejecting Buddhism altogether, he had the wisdom and drive to help reinvigorate Zen in Korea with far-reaching consequences—for Zen in Korea and ultimately for us here in the US.

Take a look at the current appropriation and corruption of Zen in America (i.e.- Zen cereal, Zen and the Art of Making a Million Dollars, Get Cured with Zen in 10 Easy Steps....), or take a close look at our own Blue Heron Zen Center, or take a look at any modern day corrupt power structures (I'm sure you could think of a few) and explore how Chinul's practice direction might inspire us today, as individuals. I recommend getting together with your dharma buddy to talk over ideas. What do you see? How can we help maintain a clear practice for generations to come?

Make a mind map, jot down notes. Whether your ideas seem possible or not, let's explore them together. I'm thinking that rather than having presentations this time around, we might have an extended conversation together about our findings. Thank you!