COPYRIGHT NOTICE

Peter D. Hershock/Chan Buddhism

is published by University of Hawai'i Press and copyrighted, © 2005, by University of Hawai'i Press. All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced in any form by any electronic or mechanical means (including photocopying, recording, or information storage and retrieval) without permission in writing from the publisher, except for reading and browsing via the World Wide Web. Users are not permitted to mount this file on any network servers.
This is not a book about enlightenment. It is a book about enlightening practice. More specifically, it is a philosophical introduction to the practice tradition of Chan Buddhism—the Chinese forebear of Korean Son and Japanese Zen.

Many people become interested in Buddhism because they believe it promises a way of transcending the trials of everyday life. According to this belief, practicing Buddhism eventually results in the consummate experience of release or freedom from suffering—the personal attainment of enlightenment. Often, this is imagined as a brilliant opening through which the practitioner passes once and for all into the extraordinary—a gateway to infinite spiritual bliss and completion.

Chan Buddhism does not promise any such extraordinary state of full and final spiritual attainment. Indeed, it explicitly insists that there is ultimately nothing to attain. The path of enlightening all beings, Chan master Mazu notes, is just “ordinary mind.” Of course, it is ordinary mind with a difference: the absence of any boundary or horizon on the other side of which lies something “more” or “better” or “mysteriously complete.”

Chan Buddhists do use metaphors of doors or gateways in explaining how one enters the spirit of Chan. But they refer to passages that open fully into the world, not out of it. Passing through the gate of Chan is to leave behind the narrowness of the self and its binding destinies. Chan directs us into an unending process of cultivating and demonstrating both appreciative and contributory virtuosity—a horizonless capacity for according with our situation and responding as needed. This is not freedom from the world and its relationships but tirelessly within them.

The genealogy of Chan is traditionally traced back to the Buddha and his mind-to-mind transmission of the Dharma to Mahakasyapa in the fifth century B.C.E. By the time Chan teachings began circulating in the late sixth or early seventh century C.E., Buddhism had been spreading and diversifying in alternating waves of cultural accommodation and countercultural advocacy for over a thousand years.
throughout India, Central Asia, Tibet, Southeast Asia, and East Asia. Forged in China by dramatic virtuosos responding to intense and chronic personal, communal, and cultural crisis, Chan was arguably the most iconoclastic, sober, and yet brilliantly celebratory branch of the Buddhist family tree. Today—especially in the West—it remains the ancestral source of some of the most vibrant forms of Buddhist thought and practice.

With surprising earthiness, discourse records from the first centuries of Chan reveal a spirited and diverse community in which the voice of authority is in turns audacious and egalitarian, profoundly deferential and irreverent, fiercely humorous and heroically uninhibited. In the practice tradition of Chan, the hallmark of excellence is not the ability to transmit a fixed canon or act according to set customs and principles. It is unprecedented and yet skilled immediacy or improvisational genius.

In a thirteenth-century compilation of anecdotes and commentaries, the Gateless Frontier Pass (Wumen guan), the dramatic tone of Chan is expressed in a striking, exclamatory vignette: “On the cliff-edge of life and death, commanding complete freedom! Among the six paths of embodiment and the four forms of birth, reveling in joyous and playful attentive virtuosity (samadhi)!"* With utterly refreshing candor, Chan calls on us to celebrate the enlightening possibilities given right here and now. It offers no substantial rewards and no specific experiential treasures: only the means of realizing unwavering confidence for entering into ever deeper and more liberating intimacy with our immediate surroundings. In this sense, Chan awakening is no private affair, but an irreducibly social process. Whether we are standing, sitting, walking, or lying down, Chan means realizing horizonless and responsive presence with and for one another.

Like a fiery jazz performance, Chan’s responsive immediacy alone might command one’s attention. As is true of virtuoso musical performances, the words and actions through which the spirit of Chan

* All translations included are my own. Readers interested in full translations of quoted texts should refer to the narrative bibliography (Further Reading). References are provided for both Chinese editions of relevant texts and full English translations.
is demonstrated are uplifting reminders of human potentials. Even momentary encounters with them have clear benefits, vastly extending the horizons of what we might have believed humanly possible. But attention to such peak performances is, for most of us, quite fleeting. Even the most profound performances are quickly turned into fading memories, and the vast potentials to which they had directed us remain precisely that.

It would be a shame if such passing exposure were to exhaust our encounter with Chan. A quarter of a century ago, the Tibetan Buddhist teacher Chogyam Trungpa called attention to the temptations of “spiritual materialism.” By this, he was referring to the consumption of wisdom tradition “commodities” from around the world in a ravenous search for something more or different or better. Chan consolidated at an analogous point in China’s history, when an entire population was desperately hungry for effective, spiritual sustenance. In an overall environment alternately verging on collapse and on history-making leaps forward, Chan arose out of a need to respond immediately, surely, and helpfully to situations for which history cannot have prepared us and in which absolute principles are manifestly inappropriate. Practicing Chan is about successfully, gracefully, and even gratefully navigating uncharted and unpredictable seas.

Chan thus has a relevance that is invariably timely—and perhaps especially so for those of us who are living in times of unparalleled social, political, economic, and cultural change. Daily, we are reminded that ours is not a world built on long-established foundations. On the contrary, it is a world being built on the run, a world in which change is not just given, but rapidly accelerating. Long relied-upon practices and values are being fundamentally questioned—and often abandoned and replaced—at dizzying rates. And still we seem to be stumbling headlong from crisis to crisis with no end in sight. Chan opens breaks in the pattern: a way of liberating all beings with tireless virtuosity, resolving the trouble in any situation whatsoever, especially when there is nothing at all that we can rely on.

A crucial part of Chan’s response to the spiritual malaise of medieval China was its radical dismissal of the need for intermediaries—whether Indian texts, local religious adepts, or supramundane bodhisattvas. Thus, Chan master Huineng insisted that “it is precisely
practicing Buddhism that is the Buddha.” His point was not lost on his audience: if “our own minds are the place of enlightenment,” then China must be able to produce homegrown buddhas of its own. The ninth patriarch, Linji, took this notion to its iconoclastic extreme, telling his students to stop seeking either “enlightenment” or “the Buddha” altogether. Indeed he proclaimed, “Should you see the Buddha on the road, kill him!” In the end, we can only rely on ourselves to reshape the relationships that are sponsoring the suffering all around us. The responsibility for bringing about an enlightening situation is finally our own.

The Chan tradition thus arose as a response to the growing need of Chinese to take Buddhism truly to heart—and not just ordained clergy but laypeople as well. Unlike prior traditions of Chinese Buddhism, Chan was distinctive in taking the teachings of Chinese-born masters as basic “texts.” They did not make use of the highly sophisticated vocabularies that were present in the Indian Buddhist texts and commentaries, and in their Chinese translations and emulations. Chan literature was written in the vocabulary of everyday speech. This vernacular style of writing was ideally suited to tailoring Buddhist teachings and practices to the concrete needs of Chinese society and speaking to the spiritual longings of people turned skeptical about the ability of Confucian and Daoist rituals and teachings to meet the challenges of the times.

Like medieval China, the contemporary Western world exhibits great economic and political promise but is also deeply troubled and spiritually enervated. Alternatives to our inherited systems of values are being urgently sought in virtually every part of society. There is widespread conviction that our own history cannot prepare us for tomorrow but also an equally widespread conviction that our troubles are, finally, our own to resolve. Far from diminishing, with our collective rush into postmodernity and the increasing speed of our technological juggernaut, the relevance of Chan Buddhism is, if anything, growing.

This book is a very modest attempt to express a space within which the contemporary relevance of Chan might be more fully appreciated, by non-Buddhists and Buddhists alike. Studying Chan Buddhism recommends itself not only for intrinsic reasons but also because it
can help us to better situate ourselves in our own histories. The story of Chan is one of cultural assimilations, border crossings, crises of faith, and realizing a muscular readiness to evidence compassionate moral clarity. It is also a story about finding—in our own day-to-day relationships—the resources needed to challenge successfully the way things are and to turn our situation in a resolutely enlightening direction.

The story of Chan Buddhism cannot be understood, however, without having a basic working knowledge of its Buddhist heritage and the Chinese cultural environment into which Buddhist concepts and practices were eventually imported. My narrative approach to Chan will thus begin by briefly rehearsing the origins of Buddhism in Vedic India as a spiritual counterculture that offered systematic strategies for resolving human suffering. After introducing the central teachings and practices held in common throughout the Buddhist world, I will sketch the broad historical pattern of Buddhism’s diversification in response to changing circumstances and provide a brief summary of Buddhism’s first centuries in China.

The unique contribution made by Buddhism to China’s spiritual life can only be appreciated by understanding the ways in which Buddhism both resonated with and differed from the indigenous Chinese traditions of Confucianism and Daoism. These traditions will be introduced with an eye toward highlighting the process of cultural accommodation and advocacy by means of which Buddhism took root in Chinese soil and eventually became a truly Chinese spiritual tradition. Here, the roles played by translation and meditation will serve as an organizing theme, with particular emphasis on how Buddhism adapted to the needs of its new Chinese audience and the role played in this response by the teachings of karma, interdependence, and buddha-nature.

The best contemporary scholarship has effectively challenged the internal myths of Chan’s origins, making it clear that Chan was not born all at once, in one place, at one time. Instead, it suggests that the traditional genealogy and identity of Chan was quilted together over a period of some hundred and fifty years. As interesting and important as this scholarly narrative is, however, it is the dramatically unified emergence of Chan as depicted in its own narrative traditions that
best captures the force of Chan’s unique approach to Buddhist practice and spirituality as understood from within. And it is to these traditional narratives that I will turn in following the arc of Chan’s birth and maturation, examining in some detail a particular genealogical thread in the traditional narrative “quilt” of Chan practice: the lineage that runs from Bodhidharma through Huineng, Mazu, and Linji. These four masters continue to be central to the Chan imagination, most powerfully and effectively exemplifying the unique character of Chan spirituality.

To create a usefully general bridge to our own contemporary experience, I will follow this reading of Chan in its own terms with a philosophical “reconstruction” of Chan practice. Here the aim is to provide a coherent framework, in relatively nontechnical terms, for understanding the system of Chan practice. Particular emphasis will be placed on the ultimately performative and relational nature of Chan awakening and its contemporary relevance.

A final word is appropriate here about including a book on Buddhism—and, in particular, Chan Buddhism—in a series on Asian spiritualities. As the notion has most commonly been used in the Western world, spirituality directs us toward what is above and beyond nature and the immediate circumstances of our embodiment. On the face of it, this does not seem like a Buddhist sensibility. If all things are seen as interdependent—a basic Buddhist teaching—then there cannot be ultimate dividing lines between mind and body or between spirit and nature.

But if attending to what lies above and beyond nature and our immediate situation is not understood as crossing a metaphysical boundary into the supernatural, but rather as a matter of dissolving our habits of exclusion and relinquishing our customary horizons for what we allow to be relevant—a process of restoring our original intimacy with all things—Buddhism can be seen as a profoundly spiritual tradition. It is a spirituality devoted to erasing the fearful anguish of feeling utterly alone in this world and to resuming full presence as an appreciative and contributing part of it. It is with such an understanding that this introduction to Chan Buddhism has been written.