

To Explore the Essence of Chan Transmission in the Chinese Chan School with Positivist Buddhism

—Using the Practical Theory of Venerable Pings Xiao as a Model

Chang Chihcheng

Research Associate,

Buddhist Institute of True Enlightenment

Abstract

The Chinese Chan School is characterized by the dharma transmission of “realizing the true mind and seeing the Buddha-nature” and “the Buddha’s special transmission methods other than the teaching of the sutras.” The theory of patriarch tradition in the history of the Lamp transmission does indeed reflect the fact that Chan transmission places most emphasis on the correct actual realization. Having its roots in Bodhidharma of Indian Buddhism, Chan transmission has undergone the influence of the traditional Chinese culture and ways of thinking; to adapt to the social customs and cultural background, it has developed innovative skillful teachings and models of dharma transmission. On the appearance, its essence seems to have deviated from that of traditional Indian Buddhism. As a result, Lu Cheng, dharma-master Yinshun and “Critical Buddhism” claim that the thoughts of Chinese Buddhism and the Chan School are the Tathagatagarbha theory or “theory of original enlightenment,” and as such their essence has become different from that of Indian Buddhism. In addition, they believe that the phenomena of thought fusion, thought evolution, metaphysicization, and adaptation to the Lao-Zhuang philosophy have occurred during the development of the Chan School in China.

This article highlights the viewpoint that, while exploring the essence of Buddhism and Chan, the academic world in the past gave undue emphasis to the methodology “based on philosophical reasoning,” which has obviously resulted in restricted vision and misconceptions. On the other hand, the methodology of “Positivist Buddhism based on the interpretation from actual realization” provides a broader, deeper vision, and thus allows the users to reach the conclusion that the essence of Buddhism and that of the Chan School are identical. This article explains the notion and meaning of “Positivist Buddhism.” In addition, it opines that the Positivist Buddhism “based on the Tathagatagarbha theory of eight *vijnanas*,” which is formulated by Venerable Pings Xiao of the True Enlightenment Practitioners Association has long been the best interpretation model to understand the Chan School. Therefore, this article also briefly describes the outline of Xiao’s practical theory and his appraisal of the Chan School. From the perspective of “Positivist Buddhism,” this article points out the limitations and biases that result from the methodology “based on philosophical reasoning.” Moreover, regarding Lu Cheng et al’s beliefs

that “the Tathagatagarbha theory” or “the theory of original enlightenment” in Chinese Buddhism and the Chan School has deviated from true Indian Buddhism and has a Buddhism-like essence, this article indicates that such a viewpoint is completely wrong. The truth is, “the Tathagatagarbha theory” as well as the theories found in the sutras and treatises of the second round of dharma transmission are more complete and ultimate than those of *The Agama Sutras*. Chinese Buddhism and the Chan School, which have adopted “the Tathagatagarbha theory” as their fundamentals, have exactly the same essence as that of Indian Mahayana Buddhism.

Lastly, according to the interpretation of “Positivist Buddhism,” this article points out that the Chan transmission in the Chinese Chan School has teaching methods focusing on the actual realization of the Tathagatagarbha. Although the skillful teachings of the Chan School has seemingly shown different thoughts, thought evolution, or thought fusion over the years, its core essence consisting of actual realization has remained the same. “To realize the true mind and attain enlightenment” in the Chan School is exactly the same as “to see the Way” in Mahayana Buddhism; it means “to realize the eighth *vijnana* Tathagatagarbha.” In contrast to other teachings that enable one “to attain enlightenment through the sutras,” “the Buddha’s special transmission methods other than the teaching of the sutras” in the Chan School have their exceptional skillful means that can help the learners rapidly become enlightened and personally realize the practical theory of Indian Mahayana Buddhism. In the Chinese Chan School, whether the practice is named “the Tathagata Chan” or “the patriarch Chan,” its contents and sequence all belong to “sudden enlightenment and gradual practice.” Attaining enlightenment or seeing the Way is achieved in a sudden manner, namely, by suddenly realizing where the mind entity of the eighth *vijnana* is and seeing the whole of it (general appearance). After enlightenment, one will then enter the process of “gradual practice.” The complete content of practice after enlightenment in the Chan School is to convert to the true-such nature of the neither-arising-nor-ceasing and inherently pure Tathagatagarbha. The goal is to eliminate the vexation-hindrances, and to go deeply into the different functions of all the seeds stored in the Tathagatagarbha in order to eradicate the cognition-hindrances. The ultimate aim of practice is to achieve the perfect Buddhahood. The teachings of the Chinese Chan School consist of Positivist Buddhism, rather than Buddhist study via thinking or reasoning. Therefore, from the perspective of actual realization, the essence and contents of Chan transmission in the Chinese Chan School are in fact consistent with those of the Mahayana Buddhism of Indian Madhyamika, Vijnana-Only, and Tathagatagarbha system.

Keywords: Positivist Buddhism, Chan School, Chan transmission, positivist hermeneutics, eighth *vijnana*, Tathagatagarbha, Alayavijnana, Pings Xiao, practical theory, theory of original enlightenment