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### Reaching Enlightenment According to *Platform Sutra* and *Zhu Xi*

Both Huineng and Zhu Xi are what we would consider intellectuals, so it is hardly surprising that they both explore the process of gaining knowledge<sup>1</sup>. In particular, section 12 of the *Platform Sutra* and section 4.3 from Zhu Xi's *Learning to be a Sage* provide approaches that are in some ways similar, yet manage to express the differences between Huineng's Chan Buddhism and Zhu Xi's Neo-Confucianism.

Before proceeding further, it is important to acknowledge the temporal relationship between the two figures. Huineng lived in the 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> century while Zhu Xi lived almost half a millennium later, in the 12<sup>th</sup> century. Zhu Xi was evidently aware of Chan Buddhism beliefs and even went as far as denouncing them in certain situations (Chan, et al., 1999). However, given the limited scope of these passages which deal mainly in the unlocking of inherent knowledge, this rejection of Chan beliefs is less relevant. On the contrary, it appears that the rhetoric of these two passages share the same structure and differ in the details unique to the two different philosophies. This and Zhu Xi's presence after Huineng leads to a tempting conjecture that Zhu Xi may have adopted more elements from Chan Buddhism than his denunciations of it would suggest.

A possible way to parse the structure of the argument in both passages is to split them into three parts: (1) humans inherently hold a form of truth, (2) that truth does not naturally manifest itself, and (3) we require external influence to attain that truth. The form of truth in the context of Huineng

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<sup>1</sup> For lack of a more general word, "knowledge" and "truth" is used in this essay to refer to the set containing "understanding and insight" (from *Platform Sutra*) and "moral principle" (from Zhu Xi).

can be traced to the core Chan belief that every human has an inherent Buddha Nature (Ivanhoe P. J., 2009). On the other hand, the form of truth in the context of Zhu Xi can be traced to Mengzi's<sup>2</sup> views expressed in 6A6 that "benevolence, righteousness, propriety, and wisdom" are inherent (Ivanhoe & Van Norden, 2001). Unless one traces the roots of Chan Buddhism or Mengzi further, it appears that Huineng and Zhu Xi have arrived at this part of the argument based on different independent origins. The second part of the argument that the truth does not naturally manifest itself does not come as a surprise based on the assumption that the first part of the statement holds and on empirical evidence that not all humans are enlightened – if all humans inherently hold the truth, but there exists unenlightened humans, then that truth must somehow not manifest itself naturally. A sufficiently intelligent person could have independently deduced this, further supporting the idea that the arguments were arrived at independently. Finally, the third part, that we require external influence to manifest the truth, in both passages are natural consequences of the two previous parts. If humans inherently know the truth, but that truth does not manifest itself naturally, then it is natural to provide information on how to access or manifest that truth. This interpretation of the overarching argument, thus negates the necessity of the tempting conjecture provided above. Despite the similarities in the overarching idea, Zhu Xi's argument may not necessarily originate Huineng's.

Regarding the details, it is simply a matter of filling in the gaps in the macro-level arguments described above with the respective philosophy. In the first part, the truth referred to by Huineng is "understanding and insight" while the truth referred to by Zhu Xi is "moral principle." This raises the question of how the two are different and how they relate to each other. Ivanhoe states that followers of Chan Buddhism believe that insight leads to enlightenment (Ivanhoe P. J., 2009). Here, enlightenment is the state in which one attempts to attain. On the other hand, Zhu Xi believes that everything has a principle (Chan, et al., 1999). Unlike insight in Chan Buddhism, Zhu Xi did not explicitly state that

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<sup>2</sup> Zhu Xi expressed that his ideas were influenced by Mengzi.

knowledge of principle is somehow transformative. Nevertheless, it is worth pointing out the beginning of Zhu Xi's 4.3 which states "learning is to focus on what is of vital importance to our selves." This evokes a sense of introspection that is also present in the "insight" desired in Buddhism, but unlike insight in Buddhism which attempts to understand the state of all things, this only places importance on what is important to the individual. In some ways, it is like a subset of the truth referred to by Huineng.

The second aspect is the explanation of why the truth does not naturally manifest itself. On this, Huineng believes it is due to "the delusion of their [conditioned] minds," while Zhu Xi believes humans must "experience it [moral principle] if it is to have any effect." Like the previous part, this is another instance where they both cover similar grounds, but the scope referred to by Huineng is much more general than that of Zhu Xi. Huineng focuses on the individual's mind, whereas Zhu Xi focuses on the culmination of experience<sup>3</sup> which one can say is a part of an individual's mind. Placing these ideas into the larger context of each philosophy, we see Huineng touching on the abstract concept of the mind, which is an idea explored in Buddhism, while Zhu Xi leans more towards the idea of experience, which stems for the Neo-Confucian idea that places importance on previous traditions.

The third part of the argument is the external influence required to attain the truth. Here, Huineng believes this is achieved through "a great and learned friend" while Zhu Xi believes one attains it by "book learning."<sup>4</sup> Assuming the "friend" refers to another human, these are two very different approaches. Let us first consider the possible origins of these views. Huineng came from a poor family background, whereas Zhu Xi was the son of a sheriff. This, combined with their respective era, led to a difference in exposure to written texts. As highlighted in the first part of the *Platform Sutra*, Huineng

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<sup>3</sup> Experience is interpreted in this essay as referring to events that occurred in one's past. Whether one understands its significance or implications is less important.

<sup>4</sup> Zhu Xi does also stress the importance of guidance from another human in other passages. However, given this passage, there is a stronger emphasis on reading, rather than that human guidance.

was illiterate.<sup>5</sup> On the other hand, Zhu Xi passed the Imperial Examination and became a scholar. Since the Song Imperial Examination required knowledge of literature and many of the Classics, it is safe to say that Zhu Xi was not only literate, but also had a great understanding of the Classics. Hence, it is hardly surprising that a man with limited exposure to written text places less importance on it than a man who spent his childhood studying it.

With this, we pivot our discussion from content scope to the relationship of this content and society. Literacy plays very different roles in these two different philosophical views. As Huineng has demonstrated in the *Platform Sutra*, it is not a prerequisite to enlightenment. On the other hand, the reliance on “book learning” described in passage 4.3 of Zhu Xi suggests that learning is practically impossible without the ability to read. These differences may be the result of the different groups the two attempt to appeal to and how they create authority within that group. Huineng’s argument appears to be more accessible to a universal audience than Zhu Xi’s, which seems to only focus on literate circles.

One characteristic of Huineng’s passages (including section 12) is they begin with the phrase “good and learned friends.” This gesture towards the audience suggests that the text in the *Platform Sutra* was intended to be transmitted or read orally to a live audience, rather than through writing. This is during a time where writing essays to express one’s views is a possibility, yet the *Platform Sutra* is expressed in a vernacular form. In a context where only elites who had enough wealth were literate, this decision could be interpreted as a method to make the ideas also accessible to an audience with a lower socio-economic status. In addition, an interesting part of the phrase is the use of the word “friends.” While one could say that it suggests a welcoming tone of equality (despite the speaker clearly

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<sup>5</sup> Based on the emphasis placed on Huineng’s illiteracy in the *Platform Sutra*, one suspects that it serves to convey a point. Within the context of this essay, that point is interpreted as demonstrating Huineng’s *uneducated* background (where education refers to study of the Classics). Additionally, given his success in demonstrating insight to the Fifth Patriarch, it also suggests a somewhat antiestablishment view that an outsider to the intellectual tradition can succeed in the intellectual context.

being the voice of authority) that stems from Chan beliefs in humility<sup>6</sup>, an understanding of the true nature of this relationship between the speaker and audience is dependent on knowledge of the connotations of the word. However, a less nebulous observation is that a similar phrase is used to refer to who one must seek to “help them find their true nature.” Assuming that friendship is bidirectional, we can say that the speaker expects to perform the role of the “friend” for the audience. This places the speaker in an authority position as it echoes the very idea it is describing that, in a way, it places the speaker’s voice as the “great and learned friend” who can help the audience see their true nature, in other words, a mentor or teacher.

On the other hand, the implied audience of Zhu Xi is much more targeted. Zhu Xi places importance on “book learning”, which narrows down the possible audience to other officials or those intending on taking the exam. This is a much more specific audience than the one implied by Huineng. It is with this very group that Zhu Xi appears to be creating authority for the speaker in this text. The Song Imperial Examination places importance on Ruist Classics, and one of the core principles of Ruism is social hierarchy. There is a great distinction between pupil and teacher, unlike the more ambiguous “friend” used by Huineng. It is possible to see this reflected in Zhu Xi’s 4.3 in which he clearly distinguishes the “sages” from the average human. Zhu Xi also manages to create this hierarchy between teacher and student in the text itself through the didactic tone of the passage, as if Zhu Xi were to assume the role of teacher and the audience were the student. This didactic tone could be observed through Zhu Xi’s use of bold claims one should accept as fact that is unjustified or not backed up by evidence. This is analogous to how sages who Zhu Xi idolized, such as Kongzi and Mengzi, also expressed their claims, leading to an interpretation of this form as Zhu Xi attempting to assume the role of teacher in the teacher-student hierarchy.

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<sup>6</sup> Humility is upheld in the first part of the *Platform Sutra* where the monks wrote poems at night and the Fifth Patriarch secretly passed the role on to Huineng

The implied audience of Zhu Xi appears to be a subset of that of Huineng, and they both manage to create a certain level of authority in their respective context. This makes us wonder whether the two ideas can simultaneously hold in the same setting. One could say that “moral principle” can exist within “perfect understanding and insight,” suggesting the two ideas can co-exist in this regard as the scope of knowledge examined by Zhu Xi is merely a subset of that examined by Huineng.

The second part concerning why truth does not naturally manifest itself is where we encounter what may seem like a contradiction. Huineng believes that we cannot attain our own enlightenment because of “the delusion of [our] [conditioned] minds.” This would suggest that the purest state of mind (before active cleansing of delusions) is at birth, and as one grows, one gets progressively more delusional. On the other hand, Zhu Xi believes the inability to achieve enlightenment by ourselves is simply due to a lack of experience of moral principles. This would imply that as one grows and experiences more, one would get closer to enlightenment. The two passages point in different directions and appear to contradict. However, this does not prohibit the two ideas from co-existing since in both cases, this portion of the argument merely serves as fodder to justify the next part of the argument.

Finally, the last part of the argument shares the fundamentals of relying on an external influence to help unlock the truth. Huineng believes this is through a “great and learned friend” while Zhu Xi believes that this is through books written by sages. If we look at the transmission of this influence, Huineng’s “great and learned friend” has up until now been interpreted as a physical person. Now if we observe how that phrase uses “great” rather than “good” used in the first and last sentences, then we can say that this friend is no ordinary figure. It is, thus, not too far of a stretch to say that this friend can also extend to sages. Since Huineng did not explicitly state the medium of influence transmission, and the sages of old have their words and teachings passed down through books, one could see that at least on this regard, Huineng’s claim is a generalized form of Zhu Xi’s.

At first glance, the arguments of the two passages appear to share the same skeleton but are fleshed out differently based on their corresponding philosophies. If one were to ask whether both arguments can simultaneously hold in the same context, then the appropriate answer would be yes. This is particularly interesting considering the relationship between Zhu Xi and Chan Buddhism where, despite Zhu Xi's denunciations of Chan, his ideas (at least in this case), still adhere to their teachings. One could interpret this as a form of nationalism where foreign ideas, in this case Buddhism, are rejected based on their origins and not content. Additionally, having examined how each specific aspect of the two passages relate to one another, it becomes increasingly evident that specific ideas expressed by Zhu Xi are subsets of the ideas expressed by Huineng. One could also say this is echoed in the implied audience where Huineng appeals to a much more universal audience than Zhu Xi. Nevertheless, within the scope of these passages, if one were to follow the suggestions to gaining knowledge suggested by either of them, then it would not be a trivial pursuit in reaching enlightenment.

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