

*Ordinary Mind As the Buddha;  
the Hongzhi School and the Growth of Chan Buddhism*  
by Mario Poceski

“Mind and Buddha”  
(Section starting on page 168)

One of the best-known sayings associated with *Mazu* is “Mind is Buddha” (*jixin jifo* or *jixin shi fo*).<sup>31</sup> This statement appears in *Mazu's* record and is discussed in the records of his disciples (where it is explicitly attributed to *Mazu*). Despite the long-established connection with *Mazu*, the adage “Mind is Buddha” was not his creation. The same expression appears in the records of earlier figures: outside the Chan school, it is found in two poems attributed to *Baozhi* (418–514) and *Fu dashi* (497–569);<sup>32</sup> within early Chan literature, the statement or variations on it appear in the records of *Huike*, *Daoxin*, *Huineng*, and *Nanyang Huizhong*.<sup>33</sup> Similar ideas can also be traced in the records of *Shenhui*, and they seem to have been current within the Chan school during the eighth century. Regardless of its provenance, “Mind is Buddha” was a central tenet discussed among *Mazu* and his disciples, and its usage provides clues about their doctrinal stances, exegetical strategies, and soteriological attitudes.

The idea of an essential identity between the mind of the Buddha and the minds of ordinary people was based on the *tathāgatagarbha* doctrine and the associated belief that everybody possesses Buddha-nature. It was also influenced by the notion of identity or equivalence between *saṃsāra* and *Nirvāṇa*, propounded in scriptures such as the *Prajñāpāramitā*, *Vimalakīrti*, and *Huayan*, as well as *Madhyamaka* texts. As noted in the previous chapter, such beliefs and doctrines had a high currency in medieval Chinese Buddhism and were not peculiar to the Chan school. The idea of an essential identity between the minds of the Buddha and ordinary people (or, in canonical parlance, living/sentient beings) is illustrated by this famous verse from the *Huayan Scripture*:

As mind is, so is the Buddha;  
As the Buddha is, so are living beings.  
One should know that the Buddha's and mind's  
Essential nature is boundless. 34

In Tang Buddhism, the conception of a fundamental identity between the minds of Buddhas and ordinary persons often went beyond a belief in the Buddha-nature as a potential for the realization of Buddhahood. This identity was sometimes premised on belief in the existence of “true mind” (*zhenxin*) inherent in each person. Although the precise ontological status of the true mind was usually glossed over, in some instances it was understood as a substratum of pure awareness residing within every person, which is behind all thoughts and actions, as can be seen in this passage from *Zongmi's Chanyuan zhuquanji duxu*:

*This teaching propounds that all sentient beings without exception have the empty, tranquil, true mind. From time without beginning, it is the intrinsically pure, effulgent, unobstructed, clear, and bright ever-present awareness. It abides forever and will never perish on into the infinite future. It is termed Buddha-nature; it is also termed tathāgatagarbha and mind-ground. 35*

Ordinary people are supposedly unaware of the true mind's sublime actuality because they are caught up in webs of attachments, desires, and views. Accordingly, they fail to see that the deluded thoughts that obscure the true mind are little more than adventitious defilements. Regardless of that fundamental ignorance, according to *Zongmi* and others, all activities performed in the course of everyday life are functions (*yong*) of the Buddha-nature, which constitutes the real nature or essence of each person.

The association of the adage “mind is Buddha” with Mazu reflects a common perception that it played an important role in his thought. This is mirrored in Mazu's record, which includes such statements as “*All of you should believe that your mind is Buddha, that this mind is identical with Buddha . . . Outside of mind there is no other Buddha, outside of Buddha there is no other mind.*” 36 In addition, as we will see shortly, in the records of Mazu's disciples there are discussions of the meaning and ramifications of Mazu's adage. But before going there, let us explore a bit more of Mazu's teachings on this subject. In one of his sermons, he compares the ***tathāgatagarbha*** with the *dharmakāya* (*fashen*), the essential body of the Buddha:

*“In bondage it is called tathāgatagarbha; when liberated it is called the pure dharmakāya. The dharmakāya is boundless; its essence is neither increasing nor decreasing. In order to respond to beings, it can manifest as big or small, square or round. It is like a reflection of the moon in water. It functions smoothly without establishing roots.” 37*

Mazu's sermon then goes on to introduce the two aspects of the “mind of sentient beings” described in the *Awakening of Faith*: the mind in terms of “birth and death” and “suchness.” This formulation conveys a sense of intimate correlation and continuity between the phenomenal realm and ultimate reality, which intersect in the human mind, a key idea in the *Awakening of Faith*, a text that exerted far-reaching influence on the doctrinal development of Chinese Buddhism.

*“The mind can be spoken of [in terms of its two aspects]: birth and death, and suchness. The mind as suchness is like a clear mirror, which can reflect images. The mirror symbolizes the mind; the images symbolize phenomena (dharmas). If the mind attaches to phenomena, then it gets involved in external causes and conditions, which is the meaning of birth and death. If the mind does not attach to phenomena, that is the meaning of suchness.”* 38

Here Mazu alludes to the familiar metaphor of the mind as a clear mirror that reflects phenomenal reality, which has several parallels in medieval Buddhist literature. The mind's fundamental nature remains the same, but when there is attachment one experiences saṃsāra, while when attachment is obliterated there is a return to *suchness*. In another sermon, Mazu adds, “If you want to know the mind, that which is talking right now is nothing else but your mind. This mind is called Buddha. It is also the Buddha of the true Dharma-body (*dharmakāya*), and it is also called the Way.” 39

Among Mazu's disciples, Baizhang's record mostly shies away from the teaching of “mind is Buddha” and avoids adopting doctrinal stances derived from it, 40 as does Dazhu's treatise. 41 This probably reflects the backlash against the unreflective and one-sided appropriations of the adage discussed later, a trend that is evident among Mazu's first-generation disciples. In contrast, Mazu's saying is frequently invoked in Huangbo's two records, which overall are more inclined to bring into play the concepts of the *tathāgatagarbha* and Buddha-nature and often employ essentialist expressions. 42 A few examples:

“Mind is Buddha; no-mind is the Way. Simply do not give rise to conceptual thoughts, thinking in terms of existence and nothingness, long and short, others and self, subject and object. Mind is originally Buddha; Buddha is originally mind. The mind is like empty space. Therefore, it has been said, “The Buddha's true Dharma-body is like empty space.” 43 There is no use seeking elsewhere, for when there is seeking it all [leads to] suffering. 44

Your mind is Buddha. The Buddha is mind, and mind and Buddha are not different. Therefore, it is said [by Mazu], “Mind is Buddha.” If you leave the mind, there is no other Buddha. 45

Mind is Buddha. From the various Buddhas at the top, all the way down to squirming and crawling creatures, all have Buddha-nature and share the same mind essence. Therefore, when Bodhidharma came from India, he only transmitted the teaching of One Mind, directly pointing out that all living beings are originally Buddhas. It is not something [to be attained] by means of practice. Right now, only come to know your mind and perceive your original nature, and do not seek anything else.” 46

The teaching of “mind is Buddha” conveyed an optimistic view of the human predicament, laying emphasis on a source of spiritual perfection that is within the mind of each individual. According to it, since ultimate reality is, in a way, present within oneself—in fact, it constitutes one's true nature—all one needs to do is let go of false thoughts and attachments, which hinder the spontaneous manifestation and unhindered functioning of the true mind. However, notwithstanding the appeal of the premise of universal Buddhahood, the teaching of “mind is Buddha” inherited the problems associated with the tathāgatagarbha doctrine, whose basic message was fraught with ambiguities that had significant ontological, epistemic, and soteriological ramifications. When the “mind” of ordinary people is equated with Buddhahood, what kind of mind is meant? Is the deluded and impure mind of everyday experience, with all its thoughts and feelings, included in it? Alternatively, is the term pointing to a primordially pure mind, a numinous essence that is separate from ordinary mental activities? Or perhaps the two orders—pure and impure, deluded and enlightened—can be brought together, so that common mental states such as greed, hatred, and ignorance are seen as manifestation of the Buddha-nature? In his account of the Hongzhou school's teachings as radical nondualism, Zongmi suggests the last possibility:

“Hongzhou school teaches that the arising of mental activity, the movement of thought, snapping the fingers, or moving the eyes, all actions and activities are the functioning of the entire essence of the Buddha-nature. Since there is no other kind of functioning, greed, anger, and folly, the performance of good and bad actions, and the experiencing of their pleasurable and painful consequences are all, in their entirety, Buddha-nature.” 47

When delusion and enlightenment, good and evil, are collapsed in a manner suggested by Zongmi, a host of issues are raised, not least in the ethical sphere, where such views can lead to antinomianism. It is possible to take issue with the completeness and

accuracy of Zongmi's depiction of the Hongzhou school's teaching, but putting that aside for the moment, it is important to note that he presents a plausible interpretation that ensues from a facile assertion of an essential unity between the minds of ordinary people and the Buddha. As we will see, others both outside and within the Hongzhou school expressed concern about possible misinterpretations of Mazu's adage and took issue with doctrinal and soteriological ramifications arising from the teaching concerning the identity of mind and Buddha.