

*Ordinary Mind As the Buddha;
the Hongzhi School and the Growth of Chan Buddhism*
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“Ordinary Mind”
(Section starting on pg. 182)

Besides “mind is Buddha,” the best-known adage attributed to Mazu is “ordinary mind is the Way” (*pingchang xin shi dao*).⁸¹ Unlike “mind is Buddha,” the expression “ordinary mind is the Way” was originally coined by Mazu. The two statements are closely related: the second adage expands on the first, pointing out that the realization of truth is to be found within the context of everyday life, in the mind of each person. The notion of “ordinary mind” points out the proximity and all-pervasiveness of reality. In one of his sermons, Mazu defines “ordinary mind”:

“The Way needs no cultivation; just prevent defilement. What is defilement? with a mind of birth and death one acts in a contrived manner, then everything is defilement. If one wants to know the Way directly: ordinary is the Way! What do I mean by “ordinary mind?” [It is a mind] that is devoid of [contrived] activity, and is without [notions of] right and wrong, grasping and rejecting, terminable and permanent, worldly and holy. The [Vimalakīrti] scripture says, “Neither the practice of ordinary people, nor the practice of sages, that is the Bodhisattva’s practice.”⁸² Just now, whether walking, standing, sitting, or reclining, responding to situations and dealing with people as they come: everything is the Way.” 83

Presumably Mazu directs these instructions to monks engaged in contemplative practice. In that context, they serve as instruction about the cultivation of a holistic state of awareness, in which the mind abandons all defilements and is unattached to dualistic concepts such as worldliness and holiness, permanence and impermanence. One of Mazu’s key points is that such a mental state can be perfected within the context of everyday life. Since all things and events partake of the character of reality, they provide avenues for the cultivation of detachment and transcendence. The passage can also be read as a caution against quietist withdrawal from the world and the cultivation of refined states of meditative absorption, symbolized by the sages who follow the Hīnayāna path.

From Mazu’s perspective, the state of “ordinary mind” is the goal of practice. It also denotes a method of cultivation, which involves single-minded endeavor to maintain a detached state of non-dual awareness. In that context, religious practice involves a constant effort to abstain from giving rise to discriminating

thoughts, which bifurcate reality into dualistic opposites and obscure the essential nature of the “ordinary mind.” When the practitioner perfects such a mental state, his or her mind becomes freed from fixations and grasping, as the unobstructed function of the ordinary mind manifests in ordinary acts. As affirmed in one of the poems of Pang Yun (d. 808?), Mazu's famous lay disciple, when someone is liberated, the “supernatural powers (*abhijñā*) and sublime activity” traditionally associated with

Mahāyāna notions of spiritual perfection are manifested in such prosaic acts as fetching water and carrying firewood:

*“My daily activity is not different,
It is only that I am spontaneously in harmony with it;
Not grasping or rejecting anything,
Everywhere there is nothing to assert or oppose.
Whose are the titles of [those who wear] vermilion and purple?84
The mountain is without a speck of dust.
Supernatural powers and wonderful activity:
Fetching water and carrying firewood.”85*

The sublime ordinariness described in Pang Yun's poem presupposes that ultimate reality permeates everything. Suchness, reality, truth, and so forth, are purportedly manifest in all things and events, and infuse all aspects of human life. Since everything partakes of the character of reality, according to Mazu and Pang Yun, authentic practice and realization do not presuppose leaving the ordinary world. In fact, they both insinuate that there is no other place to go. For better or worse, human beings exist in this world and create their own reality. Therefore, spiritual liberation is pursued and realized within the human world, which is not apart from the realm of reality. Mazu describes the all pervasiveness of truth/reality:

“There is no place to stand where one leaves the Truth.” 86 The very place one stands on is the Truth; it is all one's being. If that is not so, then who is that? All dharmas [things] are Buddhadharmas and all dharmas are liberation. Liberation is identical with suchness. All dharmas never leave suchness. Whether walking, standing, sitting, or reclining, everything is always the inconceivable function [of suchness]. The scriptures say that the Buddha is everywhere.” 87

Mazu's explication of ordinary mind, accompanied by a declaration of the ubiquitous presence of reality, evokes a sense of spontaneity and freedom. Such sentiments are made more explicit in the records of later generations of disciples. Here are a few excerpts that expand on Mazu's idea of ordinary mind, the first from the biography of Changsha Jingcen (d. 868), a leading disciple of Nanquan, in *Chuangeng lu*, and the next two from Linji's record of sayings:

A monk asked, “What is [the meaning of Mazu's saying] ‘ordinary mind is theWay?’ ”

Changsha replied, "When I want to sleep, I sleep. When I want to sit down, I sit."

The monk said, "I do not understand."

Changsha replied,

"When it is hot, I cool myself. When it is cold, I get close to the fire." 88

"Within the Buddhadharma, there is no room for an [exceptional] exertion of effort. It is only [a matter of being] ordinary, without concerns. Defecate, urinate, wear your clothes, and eat your food. When tired, lay down [to rest]. Fools laugh at me, but the wise understand me."89 From the point of view of this mountain monk, there are not that many things [you need to be anxious about]. Only be ordinary, wearing your clothes and eating your food, passing your time without any concerns. [All of] you, coming from various directions, you all have minds [set on something]. You seek the Buddha, seek the Dharma, and seek liberation and transcendence of the three realms. Fools! If you want to leave the three realms, where are you going to go?" 90

This kind of exultation of ordinariness raises some of the concerns noted earlier, including Zongmi's charge that the Hongzhou school taught that "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."91 Taking that as a clue, some commentators have suggested that Mazu's ordinary mind corresponds to the everyday mind of ordinary people, which encompasses both purity and defilement, good and evil, awakening and ignorance.92 Although Mazu's comments are pithy and open to interpretation, such an analysis does not hold. Besides all the evidence about the Hongzhou school's conception of mind and reality introduced in the last three sections, the cited passage in which Mazu defines the ordinary mind makes it clear that he does not include the impure mind and its unwholesome mental states. In the first sentence of the cited passage, he calls for an end of mental defilements. He then explains that the ordinary mind "is devoid of [contrived] activity and without [the notions of] right or wrong, grasping or rejecting, terminable or permanent, worldly or holy." Evidently, he is not collapsing the pure and impure mind or identifying the Buddhanature with the deluded mind of ordinary people. Instead, he is talking about the nondual mind, which is divested of impurities and transcends all views and attachment.

In that sense, ordinary mind is compatible with the notion of no-mind, which implies a state of mind that maintains numinous awareness but is free from discrimination and attachment. No-mind and the related concept of no-thought appear in a number of early Chan texts, such as *Erru sixing lun*, *Wuxin lun* (Treatise on No-mind; attributed, probably falsely, to Bodhidharma), the *Platform Scripture*, and *Lidai fabao ji*. The two terms are absent from Mazu's sermons and rarely appear in the records of his direct disciples, although, as already noted,

no-mind plays a central role in Huangbo's records. The idea of ordinary mind has unique connotations and exemplifies attempts to point to an ideal state of mind by means of positive expressions, in contrast to negative terms such as no-mind and no-thought. Nevertheless, in essence both "ordinary mind" and "no-mind" imply negation of the deluded, discriminating mind of everyday experience, as is evident when we compare Mazu's explanation of ordinary mind with Huangbo's depictions of nomind. In addition to the passages from Huangbo's records cited earlier in this chapter, there is this explanation of no-mind:

"No-mind is the absence of all kinds of [discriminating] mind. Its original essence is inwardly like wood and stone, unmoving and unshakable, and outwardly like empty space, unblocked and unobstructed. It is without subject and object, without locus, without form, and beyond gain and loss."⁹³ Both ordinary mind and no-mind clearly imply the cessation of conceptual attachments and transcendence of the discriminating mind."

When taken out of context, however, the teaching of ordinary mind can be interpreted in ways that raise the specter of Chan antinomianism. If truth is to be found in everything and can be realized in the context of everyday life, does that not imply that religious practices and institutions are superfluous? Such a line of reasoning seemingly undermines the rationale behind monastic life.⁹⁴ Concerns such as this, along with the problems of interpretation raised in the preceding section, bring us back to the need to place the statements of Mazu and his disciples within their pertinent historical and institutional contexts. Teachings such as "ordinary mind" evolved within a medieval monastic framework. When instructing his monastic disciples to cultivate an "ordinary mind," it is safe to presume that Mazu was not advocating a rejection of traditional regimens of monastic discipline or glorifying a secular lifestyle. As has already been noted, disciplined monastic life was the backdrop against which Mazu and his followers framed and implemented their teachings and practices. ⁹⁵ Accordingly, the naturalness and spontaneity evoked by the idea of "ordinary mind" was to be realized within the context of well-ordered monastic life.

In practical terms, within the medieval monastic milieu notions such as ordinary mind could be understood as attempts to bridge the gap between everyday actions and experiences on one hand and religious acts and functions on another. This implies expansion of the domain of practice, so that it encompasses even such routine acts as eating and putting on the robes. Yet, the spontaneity of ordinary mind was to be realized within the confines of established monastic mores and institutions. Theoretically, this enabled the individual to function in specific socio-religious surroundings without being defined or imprisoned by them. If this analysis holds, then as a religious ideal "ordinary mind" denotes a liberated state of mind, in which the Chan adept may transcend discriminating thought and dualism, even while he freely responds to things and engages in everyday events, without hindrance or confusion.

